



# **"Be not conformed to this world": Oberlin and the Fight to End Slavery, 1833-1863**

by Joseph Brent Morris

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“BE NOT CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD”: OBERLIN AND THE FIGHT TO  
END SLAVERY, 1833-1863

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“BE NOT CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD”: OBERLIN AND THE FIGHT TO  
END SLAVERY, 1833-1863

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This dissertation examines the role of Oberlin (the northern Ohio town and its organically connected college of the same name) in the antislavery struggle. It traces the antislavery origins and development of this Western “hot-bed of abolitionism,” and establishes Oberlin—the community, faculty, students, and alumni—as comprising the core of the antislavery movement in the West and one of the most influential and successful groups of abolitionists in antebellum America. Within two years of its founding, Oberlin’s founders had created a teachers’ college and adopted nearly the entire student body of Lane Seminary, who had been dismissed for their advocacy of immediate abolition. Oberlin became the first institute of higher learning to admit men and women of all races. America’s most famous revivalist (Charles Grandison Finney) was among its new faculty as were a host of outspoken proponents of immediate emancipation and social reform. From its beginning, Oberlin Institute and the community supported a cadre of activist missionaries who helped spur the abolitionist movement to its greatest period of growth and assisted in the breaking down of racial barriers in an exceedingly intolerant region.

The college and town comprised one of the most ideologically influential and tactically successful groups of abolitionists within the antislavery movement. With Oberlin in the vanguard, the West becomes the movement’s nerve center by the late 1840s. Oberlin representatives were at the cutting edge of political antislavery organization embodied in the Liberty, Free Soil, and Republican Parties, the African American convention movement, and constant facilitators in one of the nation’s busiest

Underground Railroad “depots.” Oberlin was instrumental in developing diversity in antislavery thought, an aspect of the movement that most historians have not explored. Rather than falling into the distinct categories which many scholars place abolitionists (political, radical pacifist, radical militant, clerical, etc.), Oberlin abolitionists took the field as men and women devoted to ending slavery by any means necessary, even if that meant not adhering to ideological consistency or working through unconventional methods. Their philosophy was a composite of various schools of anti-slavery thought aimed at supporting the best hope of success.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Joseph Brent Morris was born in Columbia, South Carolina in 1978. He received his BA, *magna cum laude*, in English language and Literature in 2001 from the University of South Carolina. He received his MA in American History at Cornell University in 2008 and his PhD in 2010.

This work is dedicated to John DeCarrico and Louise Sites,  
our first historians.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On my first research trip to Oberlin several years ago, I arrived at the college library about an hour before the archives opened. Sitting down to a cup of coffee in the café, I pulled out some photocopies of an old biography of an abolitionist leader (Arthur Tappan, by his brother Lewis (1870)) to look over before heading upstairs to begin my real work. I was beyond excited to be starting my archival work on Oberlin—I had read almost everything there was to be read on the subject in the secondary scholarship, and I couldn't wait to begin my own project.

But there, towards the end of the Tappan biography, I came across a challenge. Charles Grandison Finney, America's most famous revivalist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Oberlin professor of theology and later its second president seemed to have some words for me before I dug into the documents myself. In a letter to Lewis Tappan reprinted in an appendix, Finney wrote of Oberlin and the antislavery movement, "The fact is that Oberlin turned the scale in all of the Northwest. No man can tell the story right unless he knows this." I knew that, of course. The purpose of my dissertation was to emphasize and illuminate that fact. But what else might Finney have thought necessary to "tell the story right?" I had yet to turn over a page in the archives, and the great Charles Finney was already critically looking over my shoulder.

I hope that this dissertation would meet with his approval. Besides the rich records that Finney and his colleagues left for me, I could not have possibly completed this task without the help and inspiration of many, many people. In Oberlin, I was made to feel like an honorary Oberlinite by archivists Roland Baumann and Ken Grossi. They more than anyone else will be able to evaluate my use of the Oberlin archives. Also, I am indebted to Gary Kornblith and Carol Lasser for sharing with me their own work on Oberlin as well as their unique insight as Oberlinites.



Other scholars also helped me interpret the documents I found in Oberlin and pointed me to new sources as well, including Fergus Bordewich, James Horton, Marlene Merrill, William McFeely, and Stanley Harrold. Walter Edgar, Mark Smith, and Paul Johnson at the University of South Carolina inspired me to undertake graduate study in history in the first place, and offered continuous moral support throughout the process, especially during my time in Columbia. Thanks especially to Professor Johnson for serving on my dissertation committee and making my work immeasurably better in the process.

At Cornell, I am indebted to my other committee members Jon Parmenter, Richard Bense, and my chair, Ed Baptist. They are responsible for my overall graduate experience being more of a “celebration” than “an ordeal.” Margaret Washington was also closely involved in the development of this dissertation. In addition, I want to thank the participants in Cornell’s Americas Colloquium who helped me work through sections of this manuscript. My graduate student family made everything bearable, and I hope I did the same for them. Mike Schmidli, Daniel Sledge, Julian Lim, Chris Cantwell, Daegan Miller, Vernon Mitchell, Ann Wilde, and others all read parts of my manuscript, shared their thoughts, and shared their lives.

I am indebted to the staffs of the Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin College Special Collections, Kent State University Special Collections, Western Reserve Historical Society, the Ohio Historical Society, Olivet College Special Collections, the South Caroliniana Library, and the Cornell University Carl A. Kroch Division of Rare Books and Manuscripts. The interlibrary loan departments at Cornell and the University of South Carolina were often life-savers.

I was supported financially in my research by numerous grants from the Cornell University American Studies Department and Society for the Humanities. Also, Cornell University Sage and Daughters of the American Revolution fellowships

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Most importantly, my family has been the bedrock of support that most people only dream of. I can never thank my parents enough for the way they raised me and the opportunities they have made possible in my life. The unconditional pride they show in both me and my sister is overwhelming. My wife Kim has been there at every step along the way, from high school to PhD, and that is what assures me that anything is possible. That, and our precious baby Daegan, who makes everything else seem completely trivial. I love you all; thank you.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“facts are sometimes stranger than fiction”*

When the Ohio legislature gathered in Columbus to commence its 1841-1842 session, the first pressing order of business was debate over a proposed bill to revoke the charter of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute. One critic of the school from Richland County, Ohio, described the largely abolitionist faculty and students there as a “great maelstrom of seditious faction, that is exerting a more potent influence in exciting sectional animosities...than any, I may say all, all other malcontent institutions in the U.S.”<sup>1</sup> Other lawmakers seeking charter revocation called Oberlinites in general a “banditti of lawbreakers,” and “negro stealers supported by enemies of this country abroad, and emissaries at home.”<sup>2</sup>

Still, as anti-abolitionist lawmakers heaped abuse upon the name “Oberlin” and sought to crush its radical spirit through legislative fiat, a small handful of more sympathetic politicians sought to get beyond the prejudicial cant and vague anecdotes of the school’s detractors. On what specific events or facts, they asked, did critics base their censure? Just what did the Democrats mean by such imprecise terms as “infamous”?<sup>3</sup> “Why Sir,” Oberlin’s harshest critic replied matter-of-factly from the floor, “the evidence of the iniquitous character of that institution is as broad as the light of day; and those who control it, glory in their villainy.” Moreover, he believed it sufficient and damning evidence that “Rumor, with her thousand tongues, has published the enormities of that institution all over the State and the Union.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Ohio Statesman*, February 9, 1842.

<sup>2</sup> *Ohio Statesman*, December 13, 1842; *Cleveland Daily Herald*, December 12, 1842.

<sup>3</sup> *Ohio Statesman*, December 13, 1842.

<sup>4</sup> Iowa City *Palimpsest*, Vol.II, No.8 (August, 1921), 243; *Ohio Statesman*, December 13, 1842; (Elyria) *Independent Treasury*, October 5, 1842.



The Oberlin Collegiate Institute did not lose its educational charter that legislative term, nor would it in years to come, and its safety may have been partially shielded by critics' vaguely-defined arguments concerning just what "Oberlin" stood for and what the school and town of the same name had done and were doing for the abolition of slavery. It was enough for opponents to point out the established and unquestioned fact of Oberlin's significance; self evidence was sufficient proof and took the place of details. Historians have largely taken their cues regarding Oberlin from these and other loose characterizations that the school and the town attracted during the antebellum years. The radical reputation the Oberlin community earned in its first three decades has allowed scholars to confidently use its name as a keyword of sorts to denote zealous abolitionism, religiosity, and social reform. A survey of recent scholarship examining nineteenth century American history and the antislavery movement reveals scores of impressive books and articles that describe Oberlin as a crucial center of abolitionism or racial egalitarianism in a few words before hurriedly moving on to other topics, without offering any explanation of what is meant by the passing abridgment.<sup>5</sup> Other important works not only leave their discussions of

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<sup>5</sup> See Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York, 2005), 405; Ellen H. Todras, *Angelina Grimké: Voice of Abolition* (North Haven, 1999), 50; Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley, 1998), 248; Lawrence Goodheart, *Abolitionist, Actuary, Atheist: Elizur Wright and the Reform Impulse* (Kent, 1990), 59, 79, 119; Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery* (Boca Raton, 1995), 129; Evan Carton, *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America* (New York, 2006), 74; Robert M. Cover, *Justice Accused: Antislavery and the Judicial Process* (New Haven, 1984), 188; George W. Knepper, *Ohio and its People* (Kent, 2003), 404; Sally Gregory McMillen, *Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women's Rights Movement* (Oxford, 2008), 48; Leonard I. Sweet, *The Evangelical Tradition in America* (Macon, 1996), 152; William Lee Miller, *Arguing About Slavery: The Great Battle in the United States Congress* (New York, 1996), 92; Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York, 2007), 174-175; Julie Winch, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten* (New York, 2003), 359; Milton Sernett, *North Star Country: Upstate New York and the Crusade for African American Freedom* (Syracuse, 2002), 31; Daniel John McInerney, *The Fortunate Heirs of Freedom: Abolitionists and Republican Thought* (Lincoln, 1994), 61; Albert J. Von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston* (Cambridge, 1998), 303; Jacqueline Tobin and Hettie Jones, *From Midnight Till Dawn: The Last Tracks of the Underground Railroad* (New York, 2007), 22; Mason Lowance, *A House Divided: The Antebellum Slavery Debates in America, 1776-1865* (Princeton, 2003), 91; Bruce Ellis Benson and Peter Goodwin Heltzel, *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo* (Grand Rapids, 2008), 195.

Oberlin exceedingly brief, but include glaring factual mistakes in their short treatments.<sup>6</sup>

At the other far extreme in this regard are histories of Oberlin College written from the 1880s to 1940s either by Oberlin professors or others with close connections to the community.<sup>7</sup> These works simply took Oberlin notables at their word (many are perhaps better characterized as primary sources), and produced an overly-romantic picture of the town and school that has been uncritically perpetuated.<sup>8</sup> There has been only one substantial examination of Oberlin College written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, A *History of Oberlin College* by Robert S. Fletcher.<sup>9</sup> Published in 1943, Fletcher's two volume work has the feeling and romance of a promotional tract for his favorite

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<sup>6</sup> See James Brewer Stewart, *Joshua Giddings and the Tactics of Radical Politics* (Cleveland, 1970), 28, which claims that Oberlin was founded by the Lane Rebels; Louis S. Gerteis, *Morality and Utility in Antislavery Reform* (Chapel Hill, 1987), 151, which claims that Amasa Walker was a founder of the Oberlin Colony; Chris Dixon, *Perfecting the Family: Antislavery Marriages in Nineteenth Century America* (Amherst, 1997), 274, which claims Abby Kelley was an Oberlin graduate; Martha S. Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill, 2007), 68, which claims that the Oberlin Institute did not admit African American women until the 1850s.

<sup>7</sup> These works include James Harris Fairchild, *Oberlin: The Colony and the College, 1833-1883* (Oberlin, 1883); Wilbur H. Phillips, *Oberlin Colony: The Story of a Century* (Oberlin, 1933); William F. Bohn, "Oberlin, The First Hundred Years," *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, 29 (October 1932), 13-15; J.W. Holton, *Holton's Semi-Centennial Directory and Guide to Oberlin, For 1883* (Oberlin, 1883); Delavan L. Leonard, *The Story of Oberlin: The Institution, The Community, The Idea, The Movement* (Boston, 1898); *Oberliniana: A Jubilee Volume of Semi-Historical Anecdotes Connected with the Past and Present of Oberlin College*, ed. A.L. Shumway and C. DeW. Brower (Cleveland, 1883); Wilbur G. Burroughs, "Oberlin's Part in the Slavery Conflict," *Ohio State Archeological and Historical Quarterly*, 20 (April-July 1911), 269-334; E. H. Fairchild, *Historical Sketch of Oberlin College* (Springfield, 1868).

<sup>8</sup> See Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line* (Lexington, 1961); Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery* (New York, 1961); Albert J. Von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns* (Cambridge, 1998); Louis DeCaro, *Fire from the Midst of You* (New York, 2002); Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York, 1969); James McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton, 1964); Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (New York, 1957); James Horton, "Black Education at Oberlin College: A Controversial Commitment," *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol.54, No.4 (Autumn, 1985), 477-499; John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men* (Cambridge, 2002); James Brewster Stewart, *Holy Warriors* (New York, 1976); William McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York, 1991); Chris Padgett, "Come Outerism and Antislavery Violence in Ohio's Western Reserve," in *Antislavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America*, ed. John R. McKivigan and Stanley Harrold (Knoxville, 1999); Jean Fagan Yellin, *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, 1994); James Brewer Stewart, *Abolitionist Politics and the Coming of the Civil War* (Amherst, 2008); Sernett, *North Star Country*.

<sup>9</sup> Robert S. Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College: From its Foundation Through the Civil War*, 2 vols. (Oberlin, 1943).

college. Indeed, Fletcher took his undergraduate degree at Oberlin, and spent the majority of his years in academia teaching at the northern Ohio campus. These volumes were also published under the auspices of Oberlin College itself. Fletcher's impressively-researched yet lightly-analyzed narrative lacks the probing questions that many social historians have asked in the years since its publication. Though the author discusses Oberlin's unique co-educational, bi-racial, and strongly religious nature, his narrative lacks any sustained discussion of more important issues of gender, class, or even race.

Geoffrey Blodgett, another Oberlin alum and longtime faculty member, spent most of his career writing short articles for journals and local periodicals about the Oberlin community. After his death in 2005, most of his Oberlin writings were collected and published by Oberlin College as *Oberlin History*.<sup>10</sup> Though his essays are rich in "Oberliniana" and local color, most were not intended for a scholarly audience. Rather, Blodgett's work often lacks scholarly detachment and suffers from an adherence to much of the same romance as Fletcher.

The only other book explicitly examining Oberlin does actually attempt to integrate Oberlin (the town) into the larger narrative of American history, yet it is much too ambitious in that regard. Journalist Nat Brandt's *The Town that Started the Civil War* throws off all restraint in its attempt to center the coming of the sectional conflict around Oberlin and an 1858 episode of resistance against the Fugitive Slave Law. Though this particular demonstration of opposition to the unpopular federal statute was surely more important in stirring up sectional animosities than historians have admitted, Brandt does little more than recycle a single contemporary account of the rescue and combine it with Fletcher's version from the 1940s. Even though he recounts a fascinating story, Brandt fails to adequately explain the foundations of

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<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Blodgett, *Oberlin History: Essays and Impressions* (Oberlin, 2005).

“Oberlin abolitionism,” the internal community dynamics that made it unique and influential, or how it grew into an antislavery force that he credits with “starting the Civil War.” Indeed, scholarship that culminates in a title as effusive as Brandt’s leaves nearly as much to be desired as the quickly passed and clichéd teases regarding the “hotbed” of abolitionism. A locale that abolitionists, proslavery critics, and historians alike have held to such symbolic heights in the antislavery struggle merits a detailed and more objective examination of its important role in the fight to end slavery—one shorn of romantic exaggeration or over-simplification.

This dissertation seeks to give substance to the symbolic idea of “the Oberlin,” as British abolitionist Harriet Martineau referred to the town and school together in 1840. To that end, this work has four interrelated goals. Its first and overarching objective is to demonstrate the vital importance and exceptionality of the Oberlin community in the antebellum fight to end slavery, overlooked for too long. In telling that story, this thesis also attempts to bring into accord the romantic reputation of the Oberlin community as a homogenous radical base with the wide range of ideological influences and allegiances actually present within the town and institution. Thirdly, it seeks to center historians’ attention on the West as a main focal point of abolition and antislavery sentiment. This approach leads to a final goal—to use the example of Oberlin and the West as a lens through which to challenge the historiographic trend which emphasizes distinct, consistent, and widespread divisions within the abolitionist ranks from the late 1830’s through the Civil War.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Harriet Martineau, *The Martyr Age of the United States of America: With an Appeal on Behalf of the Oberlin Institute in Aid of the Abolition of Slavery* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, 1840), *passim*. The founders of Oberlin did not intend for there to be any separation between the Oberlin colony and the Oberlin Institute. As an integral part of the colonists’ mission to “glorify God in the salvation of men,” they would be expected to assist and be involved in the school’s operation just as they would be counted upon to provide for the well-being of each other and to praise God in their religious exercises. To be sure, “Oberlin” would refer to a physical place, but that place would be so organized and controlled by the founders’ Christian mission that they were already referring to the entire scheme—community, school, and mission—as “Oberlin.” In the early years, there was no attempt to specify what one meant by “Oberlin”; it stood for everything at once. Many of the first generation of colonists

The focus in this dissertation on the Oberlin community establishes it as, beyond question, one of the most important communities in the abolitionist movement, rivaling even New York City and Boston in both its symbolic and practical importance. It quietly achieved this distinction because of the unique circumstances in its early years that gathered an unprecedented multiracial and cohesive abolitionist population in the Ohio wilderness that maintained a fever-pitch of reform agitation throughout the antebellum period. The community was founded as a utopian community whose sole mission was to save souls and prepare the world for the coming millennium of Christ. Within two years, the community of only a few hundred residents had begun sending abolitionist missionaries out across the West in numbers unmatched by even the largest Eastern cities, and its college had become the most radical academic environment in the nation, perhaps the world. The Oberlin Collegiate Institute was the first institution of higher education in the United States to admit men and women of all races, and as more conservative schools persecuted or expelled outspoken student-abolitionists, Oberlin welcomed them with open arms. The school became a beacon for the nation's most progressive students, and together with a thoroughly abolitionist faculty and community, they set about the mission of ridding America of its greatest and most pressing sin—slavery. The unanimity of

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would continue their inclusive use of “Oberlin” their entire lives, and even when students began arriving from outside of the town to enroll in the school, they initially did so because of the “Oberlin” mission (which, importantly, included a manual labor system which funded their studies and helped build the town). Even after the school and the town developed degrees of distinctiveness, residents and students remained inconsistent in their usage of the term. For the purposes of this dissertation, “Oberlin Collegiate Institute” or “Oberlin Institute” (later “Oberlin College”) will be used to refer specifically to the school, and “Oberlin residents,” or a similar designation will refer to people or events not specifically related to the school. The “Oberlin community” includes the students, faculty, and non-affiliated residents. The term “Oberlin,” used by itself, will refer to the physical location of the town. However, contemporaries consistently referred to an “Oberlin” which was often inclusive of its community, school, student body, faculty, and strong reformatory beliefs, or some combination thereof. Direct quotes will not always be clarified, but my own discussion and analysis will treat this usage by referring to “the Oberlin ideal,” “the symbol of Oberlin,” etc.

spirit within the Oberlin community allowed unparalleled free discussion of abolitionism and the development of independent ideology and plans of action.

In the American Anti-Slavery Society's mid-1830s campaign to send a host of antislavery agents across the nation, national leaders appreciated the unrivaled importance, caliber, and potential of the Oberlin abolitionists. The New York-city based leadership made special efforts to recruit, train, and equip Oberlinites as traveling lecturers, and they sent out representatives of the community as the first significant group into the field. At the height of the agency system in the late 1830s, Oberlinites were also the most numerous. These student-abolitionists played a substantial and vital role in swelling the number of antislavery societies across the nation by nearly 900 percent in just two years, 1835-1837.

To both critics and supporters, Oberlin earned the reputation as the hub of Western abolitionism. Back in Oberlin, the nearly-unanimous population offered its town as a forum to develop an abolitionist ideology that both promised results and appealed to large numbers of otherwise skeptical Northerners who had been turned off both by ultra-radicals' shock tactics and conservatives' reactionary assaults on citizens' rights. Even as Eastern abolitionists feuded among themselves in the late 1830s and 1840s and proslavery forces stepped up their attacks on the antislavery movement, Oberlin (the acknowledged leadership of the Ohio and the Western movement) continued to stand out as a more practical alternative, one with emancipation and equal rights as its only goals and unencumbered by narrow ideological constraints. As the practical influence of William Lloyd Garrison and other Eastern abolitionists waned in the 1840s-1850s, Oberlin abolitionists and those who were under their influence took up the slack and kept antislavery at the front of American discourse. By the 1850s, the strongest and most insistent demands for an end to slavery were coming from Oberlin and the West.

The Oberlin community remained a constant “Gibraltar of Freedom,” as Frederick Douglass called it. Abolitionist-missionaries who went out from the town not only established countless churches and antislavery societies on the Oberlin model, but also helped found numerous towns and colleges across the nation meant to closely replicate the Oberlin spirit and mission. These included at least twelve sister towns named “Oberlin” (not to mention the “Oberlin Complex” missionary station in Jamaica), and institutions of higher education including Olivet, Hillsdale (later Michigan Central) and Adrian Colleges in Michigan, New York Central College in McGrawville, New York, Iowa (later Grinnell), United Brethren, Leander Clark, Cornell, and Tabor Colleges in Iowa, Knox, and Wheaton Colleges in Illinois, Beloit, Lawrence, and Ripon Colleges in Wisconsin, and Berea College in Kentucky.<sup>12</sup> Though Oberlin’s critics may have questioned those who claimed that the true Tree of Liberty grew within the town’s boundaries, they could not deny that the scattered “fruits” of the community put down strong and sprawling roots of their own. Everyone agreed that wherever a former Oberlinite settled, abolitionism spread exponentially.<sup>13</sup>

This captivating history has led to a nearly-unanimous portrayal of Oberlin as a consistent bastion of radicalism in an inconstant antebellum period. This view is not altogether wrong, but it is incomplete. The Oberlin community was truly a nerve center of Western reform, and the town and college were often shining examples of progressive stands on gender and racial issues. However, over the antebellum years

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<sup>12</sup> See Rayford W. Logan, *Howard University: The First Hundred Years, 1867-1967* (New York, 1969), 5; Arlan K. Gilbert, *Historic Hillsdale College: Pioneer in Higher Education, 1844-1900* (Hillsdale, 1991), 101; *History of Higher Education Annual 2002* (University Park, 2002), 52n24. See also *Oberlin: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow...*, ed. Jan DeMarinis, Jean Ebosh, and Gail Wood (Oberlin, 1996), esp. Chapter 13, <http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/OYTT/OYTT.html> (acc. May 6, 2010), a textbook used in Oberlin public schools.

<sup>13</sup> See *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 15, 1855; Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom’s Ferment: Phases of American Social History to 1860* (Minneapolis, 1944), 529-530; Dennis Brindell Fradin, *Bound for the North Star: True Stories of Fugitive Slaves* (New York, 2000), 112; Glenda Riley, *Prairie Voices: Iowa’s Pioneering Women* (Ames, 1996), 224.

the degree of the community's radicalism (relative to the overall abolitionist movement) waxed and waned considerably. In Fletcher's *A History of Oberlin College*, there is very little attention to the evolution of the Oberlin community's abolitionism over the years, or, incredibly, its larger place in the national movement as whole.

Rather than the picture drawn by Fletcher and those that have followed him, the Oberlin community's place among antebellum antislavery reformers was far from static. Moreover, leadership among the reformers did not always rest in the hands of a few white community leaders as Fletcher's work would lead one to believe. Which portion of the community actually led the others often determined whether Oberlin could be counted on as a radical force among reformers or a voice of relative moderation. Fletcher does not acknowledge the fact that some of the faculty members who provided the radical abolitionist spark in the mid 1830s were often the same men who sometimes encouraged antislavery moderation in later decades. Still, he is correct in assuming that the Oberlin community was consistently among the vanguard of antislavery reformers the majority of the time. This raises an important question: if the faculty did not always push Oberlinites towards that radicalism, who did?

Fletcher (and most scholars who have followed him) did not consider this question because he did not adequately explore the role of African Americans in the Oberlin community or seek out a Black voice to make his history more inclusive. Besides the symbolic role of Black students at Oberlin College (which he presents only superficially), Fletcher privileges white male elites in his narrative. His work is mainly an institutional history, and Black enrollment quite simply never exceeded 5 percent in the antebellum period. However, Fletcher did not realize the extent to which such a small proportion of students could have an influence far beyond their absolute numbers. In fact, Oberlin College educated more African American students



before the Civil War than all other American colleges combined, and Black non-student members of the community were also vital parts of the town's antislavery ethos and abolitionist leaders nationally. Though he has fourteen pages dedicated specifically to "The Oppressed Race," Fletcher does not appreciate that group's fundamental contribution to the "Oberlin mystique" that he otherwise lauds. The notion that African Americans with connections to Oberlin were most often the steadfast and radical conscience for the rest of the community does not surface in his study.

This short-sightedness skews other important assumptions in Fletcher's work, of which one is representative. The most important event in the early history of the college was the Lane Seminary "Rebellion" and the ensuing matriculation of a cadre of abolitionist students at the Oberlin Institute. Briefly, nearly the entire student body of Lane Seminary in Cincinnati was expelled for their abolitionist beliefs and insistence on integrating themselves into the local African American community. A Lane trustee, one of their professors, and most of these students then came to the Oberlin Institute upon the condition that African American students be admitted and abolitionist discussion be freely allowed. However, Fletcher views this episode completely out of context as a battle over free speech rather than abolition or equal rights. Certainly, the students sought free speech, but it was mainly as a means of debating the slavery question towards the end of determining the best and most practical ways to fight the institution. Fletcher's view of abolitionism, in fact, resembles that of the more conservative element among antebellum antislavery activists. Like them, the most pressing concern in the antislavery movement to Fletcher was the Slave Power's influence on free white Northerners rather than the millions of the enslaved.

To be sure, even the most reserved pronouncements by contemporaries against the institution of slavery were radical by comparison to the sentiments of the majority of Americans. However, there were wide variations among those who spoke out against slavery. Fletcher interprets antislavery broadly, lumping almost all foes of slavery together and declaring them radical for opposing the American mainstream. The most radical, such as William Lloyd Garrison, he dismisses as “destructive, ‘ultra,’ and impractical.”<sup>14</sup> Yet from the Lane Rebellion through the Civil War, Fletcher incongruously describes the abolitionism of the Oberlin community as “radical” while paying the closest attention to some of its more conservative aspects. Abolitionism in his work is a homogenous movement, and it is led by white men.

While some white abolitionists were willing to compromise on certain points in order that antislavery might gain popular appeal, Fletcher’s concentration on the masses is at the expense of the simultaneous moral battle for immediate emancipation and equal rights which, in Oberlin, was led by its influential African American population. In fact, in many important cases the two movements were at cross purposes. To Fletcher (writing in the 1930s and 1940s), antislavery politics and the quest for African American rights were equally radical (if not one and the same), antislavery and abolition were identical, and there was apparently little need to analyze the intersections and divergences of all of these reform elements. There is little hesitation on Fletcher’s part to perpetuate and rely upon the vague reputation of the Oberlin community as a “hotbed of abolitionism” without elaboration or analysis.

In relying on Fletcher, more recent scholars have done the same.<sup>15</sup> Only a few have directly accessed the Oberlin College archives in their work. Oberlin College

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<sup>14</sup> Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 265.

<sup>15</sup> *The Readers Guide to American History*, ed. Peter J. Parish (London, 1997), 155 refers readers to Fletcher for more information on Oberlin, and calls his 1943 work “a detailed and thoroughly researched, if overly laudatory, history of the college.”

archivist *emeritus* Roland Baumann has recently published a documentary history of Black education at Oberlin, and many of the documents he presents in his work are valuable pieces of the story of Oberlin's evolution in the abolitionist movement.<sup>16</sup> His editorial commentary includes a sophisticated and refreshing critique of Fletcher's work and, in a sense, a call for the very type of study that this dissertation represents. However, Baumann's primary emphasis is on Oberlin in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and his book only includes 9 documents produced before 1875. Other scholars such as Bertram Wyatt-Brown and William and Aimee Cheek have taken closer looks at Oberlin in chapter-length sections of biographical studies (Lewis Tappan and John Mercer Langston, respectively).<sup>17</sup> However, their concentrations are on individuals (individuals, importantly, whose overall lives were not necessarily Oberlin-centered) and their attention to Oberlin is peripheral to their overall projects.

Still, scholars should not be too harshly faulted for their limited treatment of Oberlin or their reliance on Fletcher's work. The fact is that *A History of Oberlin College* remains the best factual overview available. In its seventh decade, however, Fletcher's work must be replaced by a study more responsive to issues relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century scholarship like class, race, and gender. Though he rightly pays close attention to Oberlin notables like Charles Grandison Finney, Asa Mahan, Henry Cowles, James Monroe and others, it is too often to the near-exclusion of those that most other 1940s scholarship overlooked: the students and townspeople (white and most especially African Americans). This dissertation aims to correct these deficiencies, at least within the context of the antislavery movement. It will argue that these neglected groups provided the essence of the "Oberlin mystique" that permeates

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<sup>16</sup> *Constructing Black Education at Oberlin College: A Documentary History*, ed. Roland M. Baumann (Athens, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> See Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (Cleveland, 1967); William and Aimee Cheek, *John Mercer Langston and the Struggle for Black Freedom* (Urbana, 1989).

the American historical mythology. Considering all possible viewpoints, this dissertation will amend earlier historians' unquestioning insistence on the unwavering radicalism and progressivism of the Oberlin community, not by dismissing it outright, but rather by qualifying it and extending credit to all of those responsible.

Properly understood, the "real" Oberlin is central to this dissertation's third objective, that of shifting the focus to the West as a critical region in the abolition and antislavery movement. Historian Gilbert Barnes, in his path breaking work *The Anti-Slavery Impulse* (1933) first pointed out scholars' error in focusing their exclusive attention on New England and New York City as the dual nuclei of the abolitionist movement. Barnes argued for the influence of enthusiastic religion as the source of American abolitionism, and it was in the West where he located its heart. Through Theodore Dwight Weld, Barnes traced the origins of the antislavery movement back to the Second Great Awakening and the revivals of Charles Grandison Finney. From there, he argued, the abolitionist impulse was a deeply religious one—a crusade to open the eyes of America to the glaring sin of slavery.<sup>18</sup>

Barnes should have looked further into the past for the origins of the antislavery movement. It had existed for generations before the revivals of the 1820s, especially among African Americans. Moreover, the antislavery movement in the West met regular violent resistance rather than widespread acceptance. Also, in Barnes' attempt to lionize Weld and the evangelical revivalists, he attacks Garrison in an overly harsh and not always forthright manner. Still, the kernels of truth in Barnes' thesis deserve re-emphasis: the West was a critical region in the national abolitionist movement where the seeds planted by the Oberlin and Ohio abolitionists of the mid 1830s later germinated and blossomed into a powerful antislavery force.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Gilbert Barnes, *Antislavery Impulse: 1830-1844* (New York, 1933).

<sup>19</sup> Recent work has begun to shift away from the notion of New England Garrisonians as the foci of the abolitionist movement, but it mainly represents the efforts of scholars to concentrate on politics as the

To concentrate so heavily on the activities of historical actors in the East who left the heaviest paper trail misses a vital part of the antislavery story. However, a significant amount of recent scholarly work on abolition continues to discuss the movement as if there was little or no activity west of the Alleghenies.<sup>20</sup> The more recent trend among historians of antislavery to highlight the role of African Americans has also frequently given the impression that the vitality of the abolitionist movement was centered in the East.<sup>21</sup> Even historians whose subject of inquiry should have precluded such an emphasis (like Wyatt-Brown) assume the centrality of the Eastern influence based simply on the physical location there of the most visible figureheads.<sup>22</sup>

I will argue that the influence of the West (the Oberlin community in particular) has been greatly underestimated in the abolitionist movement, and that if

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most important aspect of the antislavery movement (as opposed to more narrowly-defined, morally-centered abolitionism), and it does not represent an attempt to focus specifically on the West. See for instance, Jonathan Halperin Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel Hill, 2004); Bruce Laurie, *Beyond Garrison: Antislavery and Social Reform* (New York, 2005). A notable exception to this trend is Vernon L. Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom: The Liberty Party in the Old Northwest* (Kent, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> See Edward Magdol, *The Anti-Slavery Rank and File: A Social Profile of the Abolitionists' Constituency* (New York, 1986); Robert Fanuzzi, *Abolition's Public Sphere* (Minneapolis, 2003); Louis S. Gerteis, *Morality and Utility in American Anti-Slavery Reform* (Chapel Hill, 1989); John T. Cumbler, *From Abolition to Rights For All: The Making of a Reform Community in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 2008); Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Growing Up Abolitionist: The Story of the Garrison Children* (Amherst, 2002); Chris Dixon, *Perfecting the Family: Antislavery Marriages in Nineteenth-Century America* (Amherst, 1997); Debra Gold Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Amherst, 1993); Albert J. Von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston* (Cambridge, 1998); Herbert Aptheker, *Abolitionism: A Revolutionary Movement* (Woodbridge, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> See Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*; Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley, 1998); *Courage and Conscience: Black & White Abolitionists in Boston*, ed. Donald M. Jacobs (Bloomington, 1993); Margaret Hope Bacon, *But One Race: The Life of Robert Purvis* (New York, 2007); Christine Levecq, *Slavery and Sentiment: The Politics of Feeling in Black Atlantic Antislavery Writing, 1170-1850* (Lebanon, NH, 2002); Kathryn Grover, *The Fugitive's Gibraltar: The Fugitive's Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts* (Amherst, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> See Wyatt Brown, *Lewis Tappan*, passim. A few historians, most often in biographical works, have acknowledged the importance of the West in the abolitionist movement. See Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America* (Urbana, 2009); Dorothy Sterling, *Ahead of Her Time: Abby Kelley and the Politics of Antislavery* (New York, 1990); Stanley Harrold, *Gamaliel Bailey and Antislavery Union* (Kent, 1986).

not for the unique dynamics found there, the trajectory of the entire movement would not have been the same. In the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, secular leaders like Thomas Jefferson held up the West as the salvation of a growing nation. Social reformers extolled the potential of the region in similar terms. There, all things were being made anew, improving and progressing towards ultimate perfection. However, the rapid expansion west was also a source of anxiety for the most religious of them, and they shuddered at the appalling sinfulness of the frontier. The Rev. John J. Shipherd, founder of Oberlin, called Ohio of the early nineteenth century the “valley of moral death,” and men like him saw the conquest of the “godless West” for Christianity as the first essential step towards converting the world. Going west to ensure the continuation of god-fearing virtues became for many a patriotic and religious duty.<sup>23</sup>

Oberlin was founded to be the very standard-bearer of the movement to “save” the West (and by extension, America and the world) for Christianity. As the slavery issue fermented from the 1830s through the Civil War, antislavery agitation became the most important means within the Oberlin crusade to shape America’s identity. The Oberlin academics whose primary purpose was to train evangelical missionaries operated on the premise that the conversion of sinners would then open the way to other reforms, abolitionism being chief among them. Men and women from the Oberlin community spread across the Northwest in the late 1830s and injected themselves into public roles, and their influence in the antislavery movement grew enormously.

By the mid 1840s, developments and divisions in the national movement had helped the West to become the center of abolitionism in America. In its midst, Oberlinites continued to be key players in the development of a workable, practical

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<sup>23</sup> See Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* (Cincinnati, 1835).

abolitionist ideology. In the late 1840s and 1850s, the community's influential body of African American reformers was instrumental in keeping pressure on the antislavery movement as it threatened to veer off course. Representatives of this, by far the largest body of college-educated African Americans, filled many of the most important leadership positions in Western and national Black convention movements, and they extended the Oberlin antislavery agenda to all corners of the free states.

It was also in the West where the supposedly distinct divisions within the national abolitionist movement seem most blurred. Attention on the East has too often caused historians to feel the need to draw boundaries and distinct lines between groups of antislavery activists. This dissertation's fourth objective is to complicate those assumed distinctions. The most common view in the scholarship is that three wholly separate abolitionist factions emerged out of the late 1830s and 1840s: Garrisonians, evangelicals, and political abolitionists.<sup>24</sup> Garrisonians, much of the historiography suggests, remained associated with the American Anti-Slavery Society after the abolitionist "split" of 1840, offered women a prominent place in the operation of their society, denounced direct involvement in the American electoral process or denominational church, and soon adopted their leader's affirmative position on disunion. The evangelical men who broke away to form the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society were committed to relatively orthodox evangelical Christianity, willing to work through political organizations and organized churches, and engaged

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<sup>24</sup> See Aileen Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and his Critics* (New York, 1967); Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (Boston, 1998); Ronald G. Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism After 1830* (Baltimore, 1976); Yellin, *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, 58-59; R.J.M. Blackett, *Building an Antislavery Wall: Black Abolitionists in the Atlantic Abolitionist Movement, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge, 1983), x; Junius P. Rodriguez, *Slavery in the United States: A Social, Political, and Historical Encyclopedia*, Vol.II (New York, 2007), 105; Stewart, *Abolitionist Politics and the Coming of the Civil War*, 17; Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York, 1989), 324. Walters argues at length that the various abolitionist camps were not divided by extreme ideological differences, yet he continues to assume that nearly all abolitionists claimed exclusive allegiance to one or the other faction.

in tactics and rhetoric far less inflammatory than their Garrisonian counterparts. Political abolitionists were similar to the evangelicals, yet their commitment to political action was even greater.

Historians often accept these clean divisions and spend the majority of their efforts debating this factionalism.<sup>25</sup> However, such limited and deterministic arguments are not borne out, especially where the Oberlin influence was the strongest, the West. In the final analysis, most abolitionists more closely followed the diverse Oberlin example than stood aloof from fellow reformers because of disagreements over issues of antislavery doctrines. Opposition to slavery, the most powerful political and cultural interest in antebellum America, placed all abolitionists so far from the mainstream of public opinion, even into the midst of the Civil War, that their similarities far overshadowed their differences. Most abolitionists did not follow one or another exceptional leader or set ideology to the full exclusion of all others.

To be sure, the national abolitionist “split” in 1840 occurred because of significant ideological differences among Eastern abolitionists. Women’s role in the movement, political abolitionism, nonresistance, anti-clericalism, and other issues disturbed the abolitionists’ tenuous unity and precipitated a bitter fraternal feud among a handful of reformers, especially highly visible leaders. However, historian Ronald Walters rightfully argues that the schism of 1840 and the usual explanations offered by many contemporaries and historians are “misleading.”<sup>26</sup> Certainly, divisions existed, but they were not as deep as most scholars insist, nor were they uniform. Moreover, the discord did not come anywhere close to crippling the abolitionist movement.

An analysis of abolitionism and antislavery in the West provides an alternate interpretation of the abolitionist “schism.” I argue that by 1840, control of the

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<sup>25</sup> Consider the work of Barnes, Kraditor, Wyatt-Brown, and Stauffer, as well as Frederick Blue’s edited volume, *No Taint of Compromise: Crusaders in Antislavery Politics* (Baton Rouge, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal*, 4.



antislavery movement was already shifting to local societies, especially some of those that Oberlin missionary-abolitionists had helped form in the Western states. If the moral heart of abolitionism remained in Massachusetts, Ohio was firmly established as its counterpart in the West. At the time of the national division in 1840, Ohio contained nearly 20 percent of all antislavery societies in the nation, more than any other state besides New York.<sup>27</sup> Though Eastern abolitionist leaders like William Lloyd Garrison and the Tappan brothers remained the most visible and well-known figures among fellow reformers (and especially among their enemies), the West increasingly became the most dynamic and vital center of abolitionist ideological expansion.

Moreover, investigating Western antislavery and Oberlin's influence therein makes it clearer that the issues dividing the Eastern movement were not absolutely representative. There was simply not a comparable schism among abolitionists away from the East Coast. Western antislavery crusaders were often far from consistent in their ideologies and allegiances. Their meetings were less ideologically charged. Ohio abolitionists of all persuasions, for example, coexisted more peacefully and with more civility after 1840 than their Eastern counterparts. Even after a nominal division did occur, Ohio "Garrisonians" selected an antislavery politician as head of their state organization, and members of one group saw little inconsistency in retaining their membership in the other as well.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Michael P. Young, *Bearing Witness Against Sin: The Evangelical Birth of the American Social Movement* (Chicago, 2006), 135; Theodore Clark Smith, *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Northwest* (New York, 1897), 13-14.

<sup>28</sup> *The Cincinnati Weekly Herald and Philanthropist*, July 2, 1845. See also *Philanthropist*, June 15, November 12, 1842, February 8, July 5, 1843; August 9, 1843; *Liberator*, June 24, 1842; *The Cincinnati Philanthropist and Weekly Herald*, August 16, 1845; (Utica) *Friend of Man*, June 29, 1841; Abram Brooke to Gamaliel Bailey, December 19, 1842, in *Philanthropist*, July 5, 1843; Stanley Harrold, *Gamaliel Bailey and Antislavery Union* (Kent, 1986), 44.

By moving away from the ideological rifts among New York and New England abolitionist leaders, one encounters significant numbers of Western abolitionists who selectively picked and chose various elements of their antislavery ethos from multiple and diverse examples. This allowed them the freedom to choose their abolitionist tactics unconstrained by the dictates of ideologues. This was the Oberlin tradition, and it was, in the words of Black abolitionist and friend of Oberlin David Ruggles, “practical abolitionism,” a philosophy that approved of whatever tactics promised the highest likelihood of success or progress.<sup>29</sup> The Oberlin community led the Western movement, notwithstanding its makeup of both professed Garrisonians and more moderate abolitionists. Nearly all in the town and college possessed an open mind when it came to the development of antislavery doctrine. If the particular measures proposed promised progress, then the means to that end were generally accepted wholeheartedly and in due course recommended to the various antislavery organizations of which Oberlinites claimed membership and positions of leadership.

This dissertation will avoid describing Western abolitionism in terms that perpetuate the notion of three separate factions and focus instead on what antislavery men and women had in common and what factors brought them all together in the struggle against slavery. Through a close look at what made antislavery in Oberlin work peacefully and efficiently, I hope to suggest a more complex characterization of the overall movement.

An analysis of Oberlin and the Western Reserve of Ohio is also useful in determining just who was a part of the “abolitionist movement.” Both contemporaries

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<sup>29</sup> See Graham Russell Hodges, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City* (Chapel Hill, 2010), 4, 63-69, 126, 169.

and modern scholars have debated this particular nomenclature.<sup>30</sup> In the antebellum years, it was often easy to tell who was *not* an abolitionist; slaveholders in the South and their apologists in the North clearly did not qualify, and they were a large majority. At the other extreme of the continuum were the “come-outers” who advocated withdrawal from any institution that was even remotely connected with slavery including churches, political parties, and even the national Union itself. Still, what of the wide range of men and women in between, and how should change over time be considered?

A person in the antebellum decades could be firmly against the institution of slavery but be a racist at the same time, and definitely not an abolitionist. A famous example was Pennsylvania Congressman David Wilmot. In defense of his 1846 proviso that sought to block the introduction of slavery into any territory acquired as a result of the Mexican War, Wilmot asserted that it was to be a “White Man’s Proviso” where men and women “of my own race and own color, can live without the disgrace which association with Negro slavery brings upon free labor.”<sup>31</sup> “There is no question of abolitionism here,” he assured critics.<sup>32</sup> Most members of the Free Soil Party, formed in 1848 to fight the expansion of slavery advocated by the Whigs and Democrats, held the belief that new territory should be reserved for free white laborers only, and *that* was why slaves should be barred. It was African Americans’ skin color,

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<sup>30</sup> See Henry Conkling, *An Inside View of the Rebellion, an American Citizens’ Textbook* (Cincinnati, 1864), 5; Charles K. Whipple, *Relation of American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to Slavery* (Boston, 1861), 145; *Philanthropist*, July 2, November 19, 1839; Hinton Rowan Helper, *Compendium of the Impending Crisis of the South* (New York, 1860), 59-60; LaRoy Sutherland, *The Testimony of God Against Slavery* (Boston, 1836), 136; James L. Huston, “The Experiential Basis of the Northern Antislavery Impulse,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol.LVI, No.4 (November, 1990), 614; Larry Gara, “Who Was an Abolitionist,” in *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists*, ed. Martin B. Duberman (Princeton, 1965), 32-51; Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism, 1830-1870* (Cambridge, 1982), 1-2; *Encyclopedia of Antislavery and Abolition*, ed. Peter P. Hinks, John R. McKivigan, R. Owen Williams (Westport, 2007), 332-333

<sup>31</sup> Wilmot, quoted in Charles Goings, *David Wilmot* (New York, 1924), 174.

<sup>32</sup> *American History Told By Contemporaries*, Vol. IV, ed. Albert Bushnell Hart and John Gould Curtis (New York, 1909), 40.

not their inhumane status as chattel that concerned many Free Soilers. For most Americans, in fact, slavery was not about African American bondage, but white self-interest.

In this dissertation, I use the term “abolitionist” to denote those who called for immediate emancipation. An abolitionist was willing to take a public stand in support of that principle and to perform positive acts towards that end. Such activists also at least espoused commitment to the creation of a society where all races coexisted as equals. However, racism, racialism, and condescension sometimes lingered within the white-dominated movement; white abolitionists were people of their times, fully human, and fully fallible. This is a reflection that was too often passed over by some abolitionists themselves. This dissertation will credit the genuineness of abolitionists’ expressions in support of equality unless other evidence clearly discredits them. True abolitionists cherished in their minds an ideal of racial equality, though that ideal always proved an elusive reality, even in Oberlin. Rather than attempting to judge the propriety and genuineness of abolitionist means and tactics, this dissertation examines and interprets only their relative effectiveness and the motivations behind them. Naïveté, excessive optimism or pessimism (even relative among abolitionists), rather than diminish sincerity, helps define different paths toward the same goal.

Moreover, as the example of many abolitionists from the Oberlin community makes clear, one could be an abolitionist and seek “perfect,” immediatist ends, but still work to extinguish slavery through “imperfect,” or more moderate means. Some of these men and women used radical, strictly moral abolitionist meetings and spiritual means to encourage a speedy end to slavery while also speaking out against racism and inequality. Some simultaneously cast their lot with organizations which they admitted were deeply flawed, such as the Free Soil or Republican Parties, thinking they offered the most realistic hope for positive steps towards emancipation.

Abolitionists could and did adopt expediency without abandoning principle, and there is much to be learned in that regard from the Oberlin example. Professor James Monroe, one of Oberlin's most influential spokesmen in the 1850s, declared that his abolitionism included any means necessary to secure whatever positive steps were available towards emancipation at any given moment. Until the final goal was accomplished, he would continue to work and hope for more.<sup>33</sup> Strict ideological consistency may have been morally admirable to some abolitionists, but without a practical plan, it would not free a single slave.

Oberlin—the town, the college, the idea—has been remembered as one of the most powerful symbols of the American abolitionist movement, yet the actual substance behind that symbol was even greater. As Charles Grandison Finney remembered in 1874, its history had truly been quite “romantic.” He vividly recalled the obstacles overcome in the community's early years, and it reminded him of the saying “A little one shall chase a thousand.” At 82 years old, the man who had played a vital role in that drama declared himself ready to leave the chronicling of that past to others. He anticipated, though, that if a truly accurate account of those exciting early decades was ever written, “it would prove that ‘facts are sometimes stranger than fiction.’”<sup>34</sup>

## CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

Chapter One explores the background of the founding of the Oberlin community. John J. Shipherd, a product of the Great Western Revival of the late 1820s and early 1830s, went to Ohio as a missionary to “the Godless West.” He and

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<sup>33</sup> See James Monroe, “My First legislative Experience,” in *Oberlin Thursday Lectures, Addresses, and Essays* (Oberlin, 1897), 152.

<sup>34</sup> “Remarks of Ex-President Finney,” in *Dedication of Council Hall, and Re-Union of the Alumni of Oberlin Theological Seminary, at the Fortieth Anniversary, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1874* (Oberlin, 1874), 23.

colleague Philo Stewart founded a utopian community in the Northern Ohio wilderness in 1833 and named it Oberlin, after the famous French minister. As a part of their enterprise, they also founded a school, the Oberlin Institute, and opened its doors to both men and women. Pious families were recruited from New England to emigrate to Oberlin, sign a religious covenant, and consecrate their lives to God and the Oberlin missionary enterprise. However, the initial going was rough, and financial hardship nearly crippled the embryonic settlement and school before it could have any noticeable impact upon the region.

As Oberlin was being founded, other simultaneous developments had a significant impact on the development of both the school and community. Chapter Two considers the early days of modern American abolitionism in the 1830s and their connections to the nascent community. This chapter also examines the religious results of the Second Great Awakening and Great Western Revival through the early career of noted revivalist Charles Grandison Finney as he moved to New York City to consolidate the gains made in the revivals of the 1820s and early 1830s. There, he joined with other philanthropists in opposition to colonization schemes and in the founding of some of the first major antislavery societies in the United States. His attention was constantly brought back to the West by appeals from missionaries, including Oberlin's John J. Shipherd, to commence revivals in their midst. Finney eventually agreed to join the Oberlin Institute, on the condition that African American students be admitted alongside white scholars, and that freedom of discussion be categorically encouraged on all issues, abolitionism included.

The Oberlin trustees' decision to live up to their founding covenant of equality and accept African American students of both sexes led to issues examined in Chapter Three. The resulting injection of a powerful dose of egalitarianism and abolitionism helped Oberlin quickly develop into a multi-racial and genuinely democratic utopian

community. The Oberlin Institute soon became a beacon for the most progressive students across the North.

Chapter Four follows the more ambitious of the Oberlin student abolitionist-missionaries and their professors as they embarked upon the most intense blitz of abolitionist agitation in America up to that point. Oberlinites were initially the most numerous as well as some of the first lecturers into the field in 1835-1837, and they represented critical leadership in this largest period of abolitionist growth. This chapter takes a close look at these reformers and at how their efforts help to establish Oberlin as the antislavery capital of the West.

While some of its favorite sons were traveling across the region seeking antislavery converts, the Oberlin community continued to transform itself into one great antislavery society, in the words of contemporaries, “hot-bed of abolitionism.” Chapter Five examines this phenomenon, considering how the community used its isolation in the Ohio wilderness to freely discuss abolitionism and all related issues with an openness that was rare in the hostile outside world. With free speech prevailing, the community developed an independent antislavery ideology that placed them beyond other more narrow definitions of what it meant to be a “true” abolitionist. As its representatives canvassed the region, the “Oberlin school” of abolitionism took strong hold among many Western reformers.

Away from Ohio and the West, however, dissent grew within the abolitionist movement. Especially in the traditional abolitionist strongholds of New York City and New England, reformers developed and professed adherence to divergent and narrow antislavery ideologies, and from 1837-1840, opposing views on the value of independent antislavery politics, the role of women in the movement, anticlericalism, nonresistance, and other issues created an atmosphere that resulted in the split of the national society. Chapter Six explains the reasons why abolitionists in Ohio and

Oberlin in particular, were able to remain above the fray that drove a wedge between many of their Eastern colleagues. Though not always completely consistent in their antislavery ideology, reformers from Oberlin pursued whatever means they thought would best advance their foremost end, total emancipation.

Accordingly, Oberlinites were among the most vocal supporters of independent antislavery politics, and played leading roles in its development in the late 1830s and early 1840s. Even as antislavery became more popular in American politics and the radical edge of abolitionism was dulled to appeal to a larger constituency, abolitionists from Oberlin freely offered their collaboration. Chapter Seven examines the Oberlin community's contribution to the rise of the Free Soil coalition in the late 1840s. Unlike the majority of Free Soilers, however, most Oberlinites remained immediatists. Though politics offered no real hope of immediate emancipation at any time in the foreseeable future, Oberlin abolitionists hoped to secure incremental victories through the electoral process while simultaneously keeping up a moral appeal that expanded the boundaries of what was possible. Moreover, Free Soil politics was a potent weapon that helped Oberlin representatives pursue the other important aspect of their abolitionism: equal rights for free African Americans.

Chapter Eight illuminates the role of the Oberlin community in the sectional crises of the 1850s. Oberlinites played crucial roles in shaping abolitionist responses to the transgressions of the Slave Power, from the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 to the *Dred Scott* decision seven years later. Importantly, this chapter highlights the assumption of the leadership of the Oberlin community's abolitionists by African Americans, a group which had always played a vital role in its reform agenda. Led by such men as John Mercer Langston and William Howard Day, Oberlinites were



instrumental in shepherding Northern outrage over the usurpations of the Slave Power into a national movement in opposition to slavery.

Nothing any individual Oberlinite could do, however, could equal the abolitionist reputation the community earned through its participation in a busy Underground Railroad. Friends and foes alike acknowledged Oberlin as a hub of underground activity. Chapter Nine surveys the Oberlin community's involvement in assisting self-emancipating men and women to freedom from its founding years through the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue of 1858.

The Oberlin-Wellington episode involved hundreds of Oberlinites in the rescue of one of the community's residents from Kentucky slave catchers. Chapter Ten begins with the subsequent arrest of dozens of Oberlin residents, students, and professors for their involvement, as well as abolitionists' manipulation of the incident into a propaganda triumph that re-energized the lagging Republican Party in Ohio and the nation. The Rescue also hardened sectional animosities and moved the nation another step closer to the war which many Oberlinites feared, though they knew it must bring the final emancipation of four million slaves. This final chapter also considers the aftermath of the Rescue, the lead-up to the Civil War, and subsequent military enlistment of Oberlinites, white and African American, in the final fight for freedom.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *“To save the Godless West”: Revivalism, Abolition, and the Founding of Oberlin*

The story of Oberlin and the antislavery movement does not begin in Ohio, or even the Old Northwest for that matter. Its origins lay, in varying degrees, in Connecticut farmhouses, Boston printers' shops, New York City parlors, Virginia plantation fields, Mohawk Valley revival tents, West African villages, and other locales to the east. Slavery was not a new phenomenon when the Oberlin colony and school of the same name were founded in 1833, and neither was the abolitionist movement. For years, great revivals had been occurring, missionaries had been preaching on the frontier, and abolitionists had been speaking out against slavery, long before Oberlin, Ohio became a central hub of those activities.

“Oberlin” was an idea before it was a place. The story of Oberlin in the antislavery movement, therefore, begins largely in the less tangible realm of revelation and dreams: the motivation of Yankees to emigrate west, a desire to follow the biblical injunction to be perfect in God's eyes, plans to educate a missionary army of Christian soldiers to save the world and inaugurate God's government on earth, and the radical notion that slavery was America's most horrendous sin which should be instantly repented of and immediately brought to an end.

### *“HERE AM I SEND ME”*

The great evangelical revivalist Charles Grandison Finney called the Upstate New York region of the late 1820s and early 1830s a “burnt district,” an area where the fires of intensely-burning revivals had consumed everything in their paths, leaving

no spiritual fuel to burn and no more unconverted souls to bring to God.<sup>1</sup> Finney was the most important figure in these revivals, due in no small part to his dynamic and arresting preaching style. He would unfold the entirety of his six foot two inch frame before a gathered congregation, strike them dumb with his piercing, ice-cold blue eyes, and in the booming voice of a judge condemning the lowest felon to his sentence, assure his sinful listeners that they could soon burn in the flames of deepest Hell. However, Finney would never leave his audience irretrievably damned. He always fell back into a plea to each of his listeners to realize their sin, repent, and spend the rest of their lives serving God. They would have been touched by “a wasting fire in the fullness of its strength,” and restored to “spiritual fruitfulness and beauty.”<sup>2</sup> Yet when a young man from New England arrived in the midst of the greatest of these revivals in Rochester, New York in October of 1830, he did not find himself surrounded by smoldering ash or fragrant spiritual fruit. Instead, he saw all around him clotheslines sagging under the weight of wet wool clothing.

Rev. John J. Shipherd decided to stop over in Rochester with his family for the weekend as they traveled west pursuing God’s call. They had followed the Erie Canal for a time on their voyage from Shipherd’s former ministry in Vermont, and were headed to the Western Reserve of northern Ohio to begin new lives as missionaries. A man of deep faith, Shipherd did not wish to risk profaning the Sabbath by traveling on Sunday, and neither did he wish to miss the chance to renew his friendship with

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Grandison Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, ed. Garth M. Rosell and Richard A.G. DuPuis (Grand Rapids, 1989), 78-79; *The Home Missionary* (New York, 1852), 264; Orestes A. Brownson, *Brownson’s Quarterly Review*, Vol.3 (New York, 1858), 298.

<sup>2</sup> *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*, December 26, 1830; David Marks, *Memoirs of the Life of David Marks, Minister of the Gospel*, ed. Marilla Marks (Dover, NH, 1846), 381; George Frederick Wright, *Charles Grandison Finney* (Boston, 1893), 65.

Finney, who was in the midst of leading what would be remembered as one of the most extraordinary revivals of religion in American history.<sup>3</sup>

The news of Finney's tremendous Rochester revival had spread through the Burned District, appropriately enough, like wildfire in the fall of 1830. As the Shiphers made their way through the canal town, it was as if John and his family had stumbled upon a modern Pentecost. In the streets, in the alleyways, on sidewalks, in nearly every building, indeed, all around them, people were fervently praying and discussing all matters religious. As one minister remembered, "You could not go upon the streets and hear any conversation, except upon religion."<sup>4</sup> Private homes were opened for prayer meetings that could not find room in the crowded Rochester churches, and troops of devout women went door to door praying by name for those souls about which they felt the least bit anxious. And, though Shiphers would not have immediately understood the connection, he and his companions would have also noted a seemingly odd detail: the full suits of adult clothing, men's and women's, drip drying on many of Rochester's clotheslines. The night before, he would learn, the old First Presbyterian Church had begun to implode, partially collapsing upon itself and those inside it, unable to support the weight of the crowds that had been packing its sanctuary day in and day out. Some of the more frightened worshippers who did not join the stampede out the First Church's doors had leapt from the windows into the

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<sup>3</sup> The Rev. Lyman Beecher called the revival sparked by Finney's efforts in Rochester "the greatest work of God, and the greatest revival of religion, that the world has ever seen in so short a time." Finney himself said that it was "the greatest revival of religion throughout the land that this country had ever witnessed." See Finney, *Memoirs*; Frank Grenville Bearsley, *A History of American Revivals* (New York, 1904), 142-143; Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York, 1978), 3-14; Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, 1996), 113; *The Evangelical Tradition in America*, ed. Leonard I. Sweet (Macon, GA, 1997), vii; Wesley Duewel, *Revival Fire* (Grand Rapids, 1995), 109.

<sup>4</sup> Robert L. Stanton to Charles Grandison Finney, January 12, 1872, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 6, Oberlin College Archives (hereafter OCA); *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*, January 22, January 29, October 15, 1831; Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 95-115.

cold and dirty waters of the adjacent canal.<sup>5</sup> It was at once a baptism of fire and immersion.

The temporary closing of the First Church for repairs, of course, only slightly lessened Finney's preaching load. As he would for the next six months, he welcomed the arrival of any clergyman with time to spare for offering a sermon or two. Shipherd did not disappoint, and preached at the Sunday morning service at Rochester's Second Church before listening to Finney preach from the same pulpit later that evening. Still, despite compelling private conversations and Finney's desperate assurances that he had never needed his help more, Shipherd could not be talked into remaining as an assistant in the revival. He appreciated the magnitude of what was going on in the young canal town, but Shipherd felt that he had his own important part to play in bringing on the millennium, God's thousand year reign on Earth.<sup>6</sup> Finney's desires were one thing, but Shipherd believed that the Lord's work for him lay farther west. For his part, Shipherd tried to convince Finney to travel on with him, but with no more success. However, Finney's parting prayer for Shipherd that day as the friends bade

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<sup>5</sup> Levi Parsons, *History of Rochester Presbytery from the Earliest Settlement of the Country, Embracing Original Records of Ontario Association, and the Presbyteries of Ontario, Rochester (Former), Genesee River, and Rochester City* (Rochester, 1889), 244; Henry O'Reilly, *Settlement in the West: Sketched of Rochester; With Incidental Notices of Western New York* (Rochester, 1838), 279; Robert S. Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College, From its Foundation Through the Civil War*, Vol.I (Oberlin, 1943), 18-9.

<sup>6</sup> The millennium was to be a thousand year period where sin and Satan were banished from the Earth. Premillennialists believed that Christ's sudden Second Coming would precede this period. Revivalists like Finney had more optimism in human potential, and believed that the Second Coming would follow rather than precede the thousand year reign of God on Earth (thus they were often called "post-millennialists"). Christians, they believed, could speed the arrival of the millennium by making converts and ridding the world of all sin. This is especially noteworthy since the optimism expressed by these men and women inspired them to combine evangelicalism and social reform (including antislavery) in their attempt to cleanse the world. See John L. Thomas, "Romantic Reform in America, 1815-1865," *American Quarterly*, Vol.17, No.4 (Winter, 1965), 656-681; Nancy Koester, *Fortress Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States* (Minneapolis, 2007), 54-55; Michael Barkun, *The Crucible of the Millennium: The Burned-Over District of New York in the 1840s* (Syracuse, 1986), 24-25.

each other farewell was for him to go as his “pioneer” to prepare his way for an eventual mission into the “valley of death.”<sup>7</sup>

Finney would remain in Rochester through March of 1831 and eventually move his revival labors east to New York City. The Shipherds returned to their barge that next Monday and girded themselves for the trials they knew awaited them to the West, the Great Valley of the Mississippi, which John noted was “fast filling up with bones which are dry,” and where “the Sprit that giveth life is not wont to breathe upon them, till the prophet’s voice be uttered.” Shipherd admitted that the more cultivated regions of New England and the Mid-Atlantic were more inviting than the Western frontier, but these places also had more Christian laborers for the Lord’s work. Though others hesitated, and though the way was rough, Shipherd simply answered his missionary call, “Here am I send me.”<sup>8</sup>

### ***“THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES”***

The West was indeed new, but quite old as well. Of course, the territory had been home to American Indians long before Europeans set foot upon the eastern shores of North America, and traders had criss-crossed its natural highways for centuries. Still, to most Englishmen and those that followed in their footsteps, little was known of the land beyond the eastern mountains. Some assumed that the glimmer they observed on the western horizon was the Pacific Ocean and was no farther than a few days’ journey towards the setting sun. If that were true, somewhere between where the observers stood and the great ocean, he or she would have been among the

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<sup>7</sup> John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, October 15, 1830, RG 30/24, Robert S. Fletcher papers (hereafter FP), Box 8, Folder 6, OCA; John J. Shipherd to Charles Grandison Finney, March 14, 1831, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 2, OCA.; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 18-9, 67-68.

<sup>8</sup> John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, May 11, 1830, RG 30/83, John J. Shipherd papers (hereafter SP), microfilm, OCA; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 67.

first Europeans to glimpse what would some day be known as Ohio. Assuming they maintained the same superhuman farsightedness, a glance to the right would have shown him the Great Lakes, and at the shore of Lake Erie, the land which would come to be called New Connecticut, or, more commonly, the Western Reserve of Connecticut, and in Ohio, the Western Reserve.

The Reserve was part of a territory originally chartered to the Council of Plymouth in 1630. Since no one in the earliest years of European North American settlement knew just how far the land stretched west before it reached another ocean, boundaries were set between two longitudes and extended to the west indefinitely.<sup>9</sup> Both New York and Pennsylvania also claimed lands within Connecticut's tract, and after a series of bloody clashes among settlers in the 1750-1770s, Connecticut officials ceded to these states all of the lands they claimed. This effectively cut off the new state of Ohio from its western lands (to the Pacific). Still, it retained sovereignty over them until, along with all other states laying claim to far-western lands, it ceded them to the new federal government. Ohio reserved only a 120 square mile tract. Most of this it eventually sold to a group of investors calling themselves the Connecticut Land Company, for nearly 1.2 million dollars.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Connecticut Territory, for instance was described in the declaration of conveyance as "All that part of New England, in America, which lies and extends itself from a river there called Narragansett river, the space of forty leagues upon a strait line near the sea shore, towards the south-west, west by south, or west, as the coast lieth, towards Virginia...lands and hereditaments whatsoever, lying and being within the bounds aforesaid, north and south in latitude and breadth, and in length and longitude, and within all the bread aforesaid throughout all the main lands there, from the western ocean to the South Seas." See A.S. Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve, Ohio, with Biographical Sketches of the Principle Agents in Their Religious Movement* (Cincinnati, 1875), 13-14; Carroll Cutler, *A History of Western Reserve College, During its First Half Century, 1826-1876* (Cleveland, 1876), 5-6.

<sup>10</sup> James R. Albach, *Annals of the West: Embracing a Concise Account of Principle Events Which Have Occurred in the Western States and Territories From the Discovery of the Mississippi Valley to the Year Eighteen Hundred and Fifty Six* (Pittsburgh, 1858), xxx-xxxi; A.G. Riddle, "Rise of the Anti-Slavery Sentiment of the Western Reserve," *Magazine of Western History*, Vol.VI (June, 1887), 146-147; Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples*, 14; Cutler, *A History of Western Reserve College*, 5-6; Hatcher, *The Western Reserve*, 13-16.

It was a sensible investment by the land company. When the Northwest Territory was formed from these ceded lands and the Ordinance of 1787 provided for a significant governmental presence there (that is, a presence which could protect property interests), the steady stream of emigrants from the East to the West became a veritable flood. Even before colonists' cries became loudest in the 1760s, Americans had pressed the case for free expansion beyond the Appalachians. Eastern lands were becoming exhausted, overpopulation was making it hard for families to adapt themselves to diminishing relative territory, the resulting over-competition was diminishing economic opportunity. As many early Ohio settlers noted, they were inclined to look to the frontier for rehabilitation and their fortune.<sup>11</sup>

Even those who had no intention of pulling up stakes and leaving the comfort of the eastern seaboard looked upon the newly-opened West as an area of profound importance. One booster wrote that "The Valley of the Mississippi is a portion of our country which is now arresting the attention not only of our own inhabitants, but also those of foreign lands."<sup>12</sup> Thomas Jefferson and his republican followers had always viewed the trans-Appalachian West as the place where a "pure" America could flourish. The West, they believed, would enable the United States to remain a virtuous republic. Increasing numbers of small farmers moving west would ensure agrarian

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<sup>11</sup> See Abraham J. Baughman, *A History of Seneca County, Ohio: A Narrative Account of its Historical Progress, its People, and its Historical Interests*, Vol.II (Chicago, 1911), 948; S.P. Hildreth, *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of the Early Pioneer Settlers of Ohio: With Narratives of Incidences and Occurrences in 1775* (Cincinnati, 1852), 223.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi, or the Emigrants and Travellers Guide to the West. Containing a General Description of that Entire Country; and also Notices of the Soil, Productions, Rivers, and Other Channels of Intercourse and Trade: and Likewise of the Cities and Towns, Progress and Education, &c. of each State and Territory* (Philadelphia, 1834), iii; S. Augustus Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi, or the Emigrants and Travellers Guide to the West. Containing a General Description of that Entire Country; and also Notices of the Soil, Productions, Rivers, and Other Channels of Intercourse and Trade: and Likewise of the Cities and Towns, Progress and Education, &c. of each State and Territory* (Philadelphia, 1834), 5.



supremacy as well as delay the Mathusian catastrophe that Jefferson and others envisioned as the result of an overpopulated industrial East.<sup>13</sup>

Appropriately enough, the settlers who would populate the Western Reserve would hail largely from Connecticut, as the Land Company that owned and sold most of the land held its meetings and was based in Hartford. These families moved along the shore of Lake Erie from Buffalo or up the Mahoning Valley from Pittsburgh, and they gave the Reserve a distinctive New England flavor. The rest of Ohio was eventually settled largely by families from the adjoining states of Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and Virginia. The Reserve was not a simple recreation of New England in the Northwest, but it did produce a distinctive cultural pocket within a state quickly filling up with slave-state immigrants.<sup>14</sup>

The New Englanders brought with them (and indeed, were motivated to emigrate by) the Protestant impulse to encourage pure religion, self improvement, and to establish a Christian state. This was less often the case with newcomers from the more southerly regions. The New England minority, largely Congregational,

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<sup>13</sup> See Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Priestley, January 29, 1804, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol.IV, ed. H.A. Washington (Washington, D.C., 1854), 524-526; Anne Mackin, *Americans and Their Land: The House Built on Abundance* (Ann Arbor, 2006), 73-88; Thomas M. Allan, *A Republic in Time: Temporality and Social Imagination in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill, 2008), 34-41; Richard B. Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 2005), 90-91.

<sup>14</sup> Ohioans were keenly aware of their heterogeneity; in politics, religion, and even farming methods, observers noted the stark contrasts. After Ohio's admission to statehood in March of 1803 and the establishment of its own government, scarcely a session of its earliest legislatures passed without someone compiling statistics regarding the birthplaces of the various lawmakers. In 1822, one amateur statistician found that in the two houses, Pennsylvanians filled twenty seven seats, Virginians eighteen, Connecticut men thirteen, Marylanders 11, and those from New Jersey, Massachusetts, New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, Kentucky, North Carolina, and South Carolina numbered between one and seven each. It was not until 1824 that Leander Munsell became the first native-born Ohioan to take a seat in the state legislature. See *Niles Weekly Register*, February 2, 1822; Robert Emmett Chaddock, *Ohio Before 1850: A Study of the Early Influence of Pennsylvania and Southern Populations in Ohio* (New York, 1908), 43-46; *Journal of the Senate of the State of Ohio, Being the First Session of the Twenty Second General Assembly, Begun and Held in the Town of Columbus, in the County of Franklin, Monday December 1, 1822, and in the Twenty First Year of Said State* (Columbus, 1824), 51; *Ohio, the Sesquicentennial of Statehood, 1803-1953: Catalog of an Exhibition in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., January 8, 1953 to April 8, 1953* (Washington, D.C., 1953), 2; William T. Utter, *The History of the State of Ohio: The Frontier State, 1803-1825* (Columbus, 1942), 393.

maintained their devotion to an independent, introspective, and more personal spirituality, while the remainder of immigrants, largely Scots-Irish who had journeyed westward from Virginia and Pennsylvania to improve their economic situation, adhered to the traditional ministerial organization of the Presbyterian Church.<sup>15</sup>

The stream of immigrants presented the Connecticut General Association of Congregational Churches with a pressing dilemma. The Assembly felt a special responsibility for the new settlements in northern Ohio, and felt their shortage of missionaries all the more acutely when it heard stories from travelers who described the deplorable moral condition of some settlers, due in part to their having to live “like sheep having no shepherd.”<sup>16</sup> Swindlers, counterfeiterers, and confidence men loomed large in frontier Ohio society. Husbands frequently disappeared deeper into the western frontier, and fighting “for the pure fun of it” was a common pastime among settlers.<sup>17</sup> Though some boosters of the West attempted to gloss over the debauched behavior of frontiersmen as “*Independence of thought and action*,” even they could not ignore the “*apparent roughness*, which some would deem *rudeness of manners*.”<sup>18</sup>

The “blatant godlessness” of the West also roused the Presbyterian Church in the East. One Presbyterian missionary reported that he found the Ohio towns of Mesopotamia “much inclined to infidelity,” Willoughby “irritated at the presence of missionaries,” Newburgh “profaning the Sabbath,” the citizens of Cleveland “loose in principles of conduct,” and those Christian citizens of Canfield numbering only two or three.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> William S. Kennedy, *The Plan of Union, or, A History of the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches of the Western Reserve, with Biographical Sketches of the Early Missionaries* (Hudson, OH, 1856), 7-10; Francis P. Weisenburger, *The History of the State of Ohio: The Passing of the Frontier* (Columbus, 1941), 144-151.

<sup>16</sup> Kennedy, *The Plan of Union*, 11; Charles L. Zorbaugh, “The Plan of Union in Ohio,” *Church History*, Vol.6, No.2 (June, 1937), 145-146.

<sup>17</sup> Utter, *History of the State of Ohio*, 364-370; Chaddock, *Ohio Before 1850*, 130.

<sup>18</sup> Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi*, 102; See also Kennedy, *The Plan of Union*, 11-14.

<sup>19</sup> Zorbaugh, “The Plan of Union in Ohio,” 147.

As the population of Ohio mushroomed from 3,000 in 1790 to 42,156 ten years later, the Presbyterians joined the Congregationalists in the realization that their scant resources meant that coordinated effort was required; each needed the other.<sup>20</sup> In 1801, the Congregational Association of Connecticut and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church established a partnership, the “Plan of Union,” whereby clerics of either side could minister to congregations of the other. This resulted in the mobilization of “a constellation” of missionaries and the propagation of numerous “Presbygational” churches across the Ohio Valley.<sup>21</sup>

Just as many secular Americans viewed the West, particularly the Ohio Valley, as the future of the nation, sponsors of its missions there viewed it as the potential salvation of the country and perhaps the world. Lyman Beecher, a powerful Boston divine before his own removal to Ohio in 1832, recalled that Jonathan Edwards had predicted that millennium would commence in America. The “signs of the times” led Beecher to concur. It was also plain to him that the religious and political destiny of the nation was to be decided in the West. Though Atlantic commerce and manufactures would always confer some advantage on the East, Beecher believed that the western United States was destined to be not just the great central power of the nation, but of the entire world.<sup>22</sup>

Beecher was not alone in his evaluation of the West. John J. Shipherd, for one, was an example of another who followed the missionary’s call into the interior. Like Beecher, he resolved to do his part to uphold the “liberty of the world.” By the time

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<sup>20</sup> In the Western Reserve, the population grew over 1500% over seven years. See *ibid.*, 146, 150.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Ellis Thompson, *A History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (New York, 1895), 183; (New York) *The Assembly Herald*, May, 1899; Charles H. Small, *Corner Stones of Faith, or, the Origin and Characteristics of the Christian Denominations in the United States* (New York, 1898), 127-128; *A Documentary History of Religion in America to 1877*, ed. Edwin S. Gaustad and Mark A. Noll (Grand Rapids, 2003), 373; Kennedy, *The Plan of Union*, 11-13; Chris Padgett, “Evangelicals Divided: Abolition and the Plan of Union’s Demise in Ohio’s Western Reserve,” in *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery*, ed. John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay (Athens, 1998), 249-252; Zorbaugh, “The Plan of Union in Ohio,” 152.

<sup>22</sup> Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* (Cincinnati, 1835), 9-11.

Beecher had penned his *Plea for the West*, Shipherd was en route to Ohio. He had long since crossed paths with Charles Grandison Finney in Rochester and was busily engaged in developing his own plan to redeem the “valley of moral death” that would ultimately dwarf any efforts Beecher himself would undertake in his lifetime. In fact, the plan which Shipherd eventually put into motion would involve all three men, though not always voluntarily, in a venture that profoundly shaped the identity and destiny of the nation.

John Shipherd had lived a life dedicated to God since surviving a near-fatal equestrian accident in 1819. Confronted with his mortality and convinced of his entrenchment in sin, he renounced his wicked ways and launched headlong into preparation for the ministry.<sup>23</sup> Even his later near-blindness did not completely discourage Shipherd in his conviction that he must enter the ministry. After two years of having another student read lessons aloud to him, Shipherd went out into the world to preach the gospel with only his newly-gained theological training and a clutch of two or three pre-written sermons to guide him. In his first Shelburne, Vermont pastorate, he was able to make a considerable impression upon the minds of many of his parishioners in his year and a half residency.<sup>24</sup>

In 1828 Shipherd was named General Agent of the Vermont Sabbath School Union, intent on performing “a *great and good* work” by training school children “in the way they should go.” As the editor of the Union’s journal, *Youth’s Herald and Sabbath School Magazine*, Shipherd rejoiced that he had a whole state for his new parish and thousands of souls to look after. However, with only half of his salary paid, and considering the appeals for missionaries he read in the *Home Missionary and*

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<sup>23</sup> Unless otherwise noted, details on the early life of John J. Shipherd are drawn from the manuscript Esther Shipherd, “A Sketch of the Life and Labors of John J. Shipherd,” n.d., RG 30/83, SP, Box 4, OCA.

<sup>24</sup> John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, November 9, 1827, RG 30/24, FP, Box 14, Folder 6, OCA.

*Pastor's Journal*, Shipherd soon decided to lend his arm to the breaking of the “unplowed spiritual fields” of the Mississippi Valley.<sup>25</sup> In fact, long before his final *Youth's Herald* contribution appeared in December of 1830, Shipherd had already confirmed to his parents that “the finger of Providence points *westward* even to Mississippi's vast valley.” By mid-May, he was well on his way down “the stream of God's mercy,” the Erie Canal, towards the Great Lakes and Ohio.<sup>26</sup>

Shipherd settled into a vacant pulpit in Elyria, Ohio, a frontier outpost in the Western Reserve county of Lorain.<sup>27</sup> Settlement in the area was sparse, and there were only 30 members in his congregation.<sup>28</sup> Known early on clumsily as “Township 6 North of Range 19 West of the Western Reserve,” the swampy area later called Russia Township was one of the last areas of the county to be opened to settlement.<sup>29</sup> It would be there, eight years after the township had been formally organized in 1825, that Oberlin would set its roots. Until that time, however, the tract was mostly dense and unbroken forest.<sup>30</sup>

When Shipherd arrived in Elyria, there were but two other Presbyterial ministers to be found in the county, though for unknown reasons, even they were unwilling or unable to labor effectively.<sup>31</sup> He impressed those who heard him preach, and inspired one listener enough that the man wrote Charles Grandison Finney to tell

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<sup>25</sup> John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, April 7, 1829, RG 30/24, FP, Box 8, Folder 4, OCA; George Lewis Prentiss, *The Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York: Historical and Biographical Sketches of its First Fifty Years* (New York, 1889), 10-12; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 66-67.

<sup>26</sup> John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, May 11, 1830, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA; John J. Shipherd to James K. Shipherd, November 8, 1830, RG 30/24, FP, Box 14, Folder 6, OCA; George W. Knight and John R. Commons, *The History of Higher Education in Ohio* (Washington, 1891), 55.

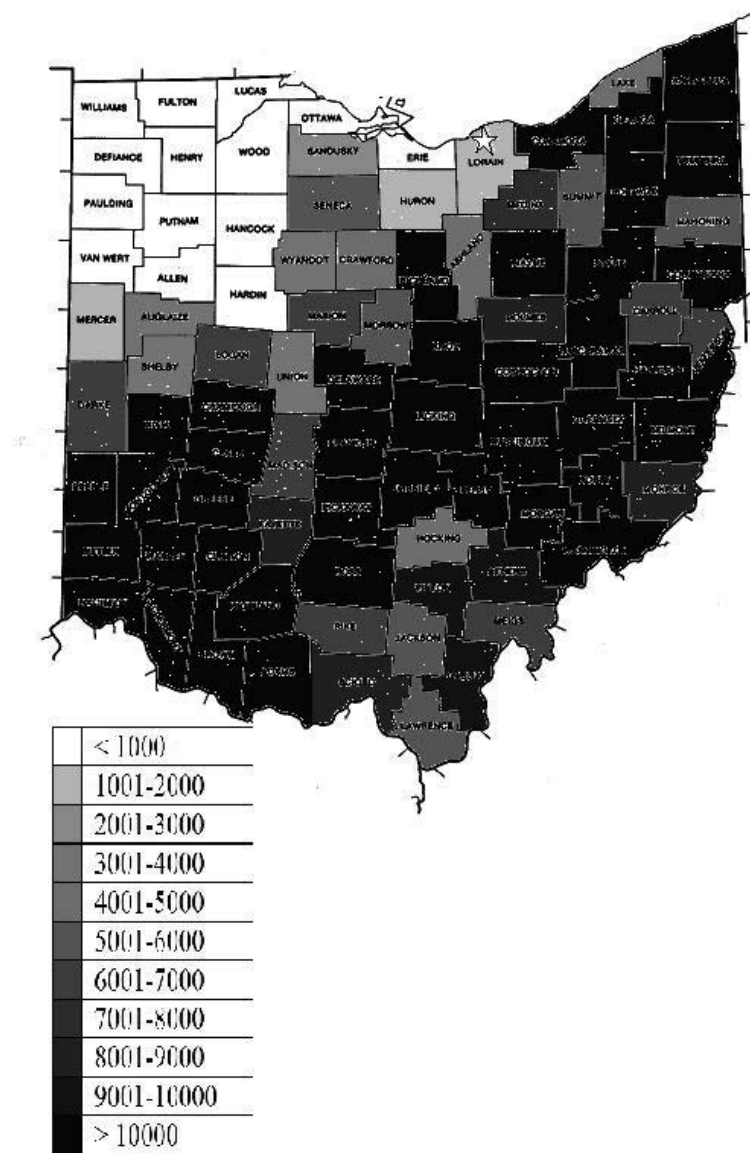
<sup>27</sup> *The Quarterly Register of the American Education Society*, Vol.3 (Boston, 1831), 315; *American Tract Magazine for the Year 1832*, Vol.VII (New York, 1832), 60; *The American Quarterly Register*, Vol.VIII (Boston, 1836), 312; Knight and Commons, *Higher Education in Ohio*, 55.

<sup>28</sup> *New York Evangelist*, April 9, 1831; Mark Hopkins, Henry Hopkins, Albert Hopkins, and Susan Sedgwick Hopkins, *Early Letters of Mark Hopkins, and Others from his Brothers and Their Mother: A Picture of Life in New England from 1770 to 1857* (New York, 1941), 41; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 71.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 71-72.

<sup>30</sup> John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, April 6, 1831, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*



**Figure 1.1: Ohio's population in 1830**

(Oberlin would be approximately where the “★” appears above “Lorain”; map by author, data from *The History of Darke County, Ohio* (1880))

him that Shipherd was “of the right Stamp.” His outspoken abolitionism also earned the approbation of antislavery champion Beriah Green, who preached the sermon at Shipherd’s Elyria induction ceremony.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> James Boyle and Laura Boyle to Charles Grandison Finney, November 30, 1831, Charles Grandison Finney papers, Microfilm, OCA; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 76; Chris Padgett, “Evangelicals

Still, Shipherd felt overwhelmed, and at least once desperately appealed to Finney for help. In the spring of 1831, Shipherd lamented to his friend and mentor that he had only converted two sinners since he arrived in Elyria, and that he had even begun to occasionally doubt his abilities as a minister. “I remember your parting prayer,” he wrote of Finney’s Rochester benediction, and reported that “As a pioneer I have opened the way to a field, than which no one of the same population can be in greater need of your ministry.” If Finney himself couldn’t come West, Shipherd begged him to advise him how to produce better results. “I do not preach right,” he complained, “I know not how to preach right. O tell me how I may thrust the two edged sword into the sinners inmost soul!”<sup>33</sup>

Finney’s reply has been lost, but by the end of May, Shipherd was piloting a revival that even the great revivalist would have been proud of. One observer wrote to the *New York Evangelist* that the Elyria revival “already seems like the scenes exhibited in Rochester.” The town had nearly ceased to operate beyond its most basic religious functions. The purchase even of simple postal supplies on a weekday afternoon was nearly impossible since “as was said in Rochester, ‘they have more important business.’”<sup>34</sup> Shipherd himself noted that it was the longest revival yet held on the Reserve, and that he had never seen God more glorified than in Elyria that summer. It was a period of “ceaseless, wrestling prayer, and immediate submission.”<sup>35</sup>

Shipherd reported to his family in New York that “God is truly doing great things for us in the valley. Oh that we had help to gather the rich harvest already

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Divided: Abolition and the plan of Union’s Demise in Ohio’s Western Reserve,” in *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery*, ed. John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay (Athens, 1998), 262.

<sup>33</sup> John J. Shipherd to Charles Grandison Finney, March 14, 1831, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 3, OCA.

<sup>34</sup> *New York Evangelist*, June 18, 1831.

<sup>35</sup> *New York Evangelist*, June 25, 1831.

whitened around us!”<sup>36</sup> By 1832, he could report to the American Home Missionary Society that he had added 63 new members to his Elyria church and that there were 160 students in Sabbath Schools, no small boast for a frontier town of just 700 people.<sup>37</sup> Shipherd had brought the Holy Spirit to Ohio, and the dry and barren souls of Ohioans, “with many tears & sorrows, [had] begun to live.”<sup>38</sup> Moreover, Shipherd began to train other young men for Western ministries in his home, including one of his many converts, Jabez Burrell, and a young man from Connecticut whom Shipherd had befriended at the Pawlet Academy, Philo Penfield Stewart.<sup>39</sup>

Though the tears and sorrows of many around Shipherd had been salved in the revival, others’, Shipherd’s in fact, remained fresh and painful. The uncouth frontier element had always been the majority in his parish, discharging firearms at his religious meetings, destroying pulpit bibles, and generally attempting to make Shipherd’s mission as arduous as possible.<sup>40</sup> He was a revivalist in a conservative community, and was often considered a fanatic. As Shipherd tried to sustain a fading revival, his enemies took the initiative.<sup>41</sup> An Elyria lawyer took it as his personal mission to ruin Shipherd’s reputation and eject him from the small town. He publicly accused the minister of “illicit intercourse” with a parishioner, and despite Shipherd’s adamant denials, news of the charge spread quickly.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, July 28, 1831, RG 30/24, FP, Box 8, Folder 7, OCA.

<sup>37</sup> *The Sixth Report of the American Home Missionary Society, : Presented by the Executive Committee, at the Anniversary Meeting, May 9, 1832. : With an Appendix, Containing a List of Auxiliary Societies, Forms of Constitutions, &c. &c.* (New York, 1832), 38; John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, April 6, 1831, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA.

<sup>38</sup> Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 81.

<sup>39</sup> John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, December 1, 1831, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA; Eugene F. Atwood, “Intimate Life Story of Philo Penfield Stewart,” *The Connecticut Magazine*, Vol.X, No.3 (1906), 426.

<sup>40</sup> John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, April 6, 1831, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA; John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, April 2, 1832, RG 30/83, SP, Box 4, OCA.

<sup>41</sup> John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, January 30, 1832, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA.

<sup>42</sup> John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, April 9, 1832, RG 30/24, Robert S. Fletcher Papers (hereafter FP), Box 14, Folder 6, OCA; N.A. Hunt to Eugene, December 11, 1881, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 5, OCA.



Faith that the Lord was on his side reassured Shipherd and allowed him to discount his worldly predicament in light of eternal perspective. “I will fear not what *man* can do unto me,” he wrote, especially since his main rival in Elyria was “manifestly the enemy of God.” He did not mind the idea of suffering as a martyr for his faith, and welcomed persecution if it kept the church from withering in sin. He defiantly proclaimed that “the blood of martyrs had been “the seed of the Ch[urch],” and if his own blood could make the church more fruitful “by flowing *from* my veins than by flowing in my veins then let it depart.”<sup>43</sup>

Shipherd also did not mind stepping aside if he thought it would benefit God’s cause and his congregation the most. He wrote in early September that his “sphere of usefulness” had been circumscribed, and offered to resign his post a week later.<sup>44</sup> Any disillusionment Shipherd may have entertained with regards to his Elyria work was further compounded by his growing conviction that an ominous dark cloud was settling over America. “The signs of the times (political & religious),” Shipherd wrote, “evinced to me that the blood of the martyrs will ere long be demanded. The state of our country is indeed fearful.” He feared that Catholics, Atheists, Deists, Universalists, and other “classes of God’s enemies” would combine their efforts against the Church. Moreover, as the dueler and slaveholder Andrew Jackson appeared assured of another term as President of the United States, Shipherd lamented that America’s “once happy government seems to be fast preparing to favor the murderous projects.”<sup>45</sup> What could he do to affect the trajectory of the nation?

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<sup>43</sup> John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, April 9, 1832, RG 30/24, FP, Box 14, Folder 6, OCA.

<sup>44</sup> John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, August 6, 1832, reprinted in James H. Fairchild, *Oberlin, the Colony and the College, 1833-1883* (Oberlin, 1883), 15-16; John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, September 3, 1832, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA.

<sup>45</sup> John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, April 9, 1832, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA; William B. Shaw, “A College that Pioneered: Oberlin 1833-1908,” *Outlook*, Vol.LXXXIX (June, 1908), 337.

## THE OBERLIN COLONY

As his thoughts shifted to something of a grander scale, Shipherd renewed his correspondence with his friend Philo P. Stewart.<sup>46</sup> Stewart, or “Steadfast” as Shipherd called him, had continued from Pawlet on his own Western calling as a missionary among the Choctaw Indians of Mississippi.<sup>47</sup> Though his wife’s failing health forced the Stewarts to give up their Mississippi mission, Philo continued to crave a role in the great Western battle for the soul of the nation.<sup>48</sup> Both men were on the cusp of new lives of “usefulness.” Shipherd was preparing to vacate his pastorate; Stewart believed that he could be more useful as a layman, but did not know how or where he could best employ his talents. Together, they developed a plan that would redirect both of their lives towards a potentially productive goal.<sup>49</sup> They would found a colony that would be “divorced from Mammon, & wedded to simplicity & true wisdom,” one whose pious community would “make our churches ashamed of their unholy alliances with earth.”<sup>50</sup> They would name the settlement “Oberlin” after the French Clergyman John Frederic Oberlin (1740-1826), whose compassionate social work in an isolated area of Alsace for sixty years had earned him worldwide recognition and respect.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Knight and Commons, *Higher Education in Ohio*, 56.

<sup>47</sup> Walter Chapin, *The Missionary Gazetteer, Comprising a View of the Inhabitants, and a Geographical Description of the Countries and Places, Where Protestant Missionaries Have Labored, Alphabetically Arranged and So Constructed as to Give a Particular and General History of Missions Throughout the World* (Woodstock, VT, 1825), 229; *The Magazine of the Reformed Dutch Church*, Vol.I (New Brunswick, NJ, 1827), 258-259; *The American Quarterly Register*, Vol.VIII (Boston, 1836), 312.

<sup>48</sup> John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, August 13, 1832, RG 30/83, SP, Box 4, OCA ; John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, August 6, 1832, reprinted in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 15-16; Knight and Commons, *Higher Education in Ohio*, 55; Atwood, “Philo Penfield Stewart,” 427-428; Wilbur Phillips, *Oberlin Colony: The Story of a Century* (Oberlin, 1933), 13-14.

<sup>49</sup> John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, August 13, 1832, RG 30/83, SP, Box 4, OCA; John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, August 6, 1832, reprinted in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 15-16; *The American Quarterly Register*, Vol.VIII (Boston, 1836), 312.

<sup>50</sup> John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, August 13, 1832, RG 30/83, SP, Box 4, OCA ; John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, August 6, 1832, reprinted in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 15-16; Knight and Commons, *Higher Education in Ohio*, 56; Atwood, “Philo Penfield Stewart,” 429.

<sup>51</sup> *The American Quarterly Register*, Vol.VIII (Boston, 1836), 312; Shaw, “A College that Pioneered,” 336; Shipherd had learned of Oberlin’s ministry through a pamphlet published by the American Sunday School Union, *The Life of John Frederic Oberlin, Pastor of Waldbach in the Ban de la Roche* (New York, 1830). See John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, December 10, 1832, RG 30/83, John J.

The plan was simple yet perspicacious. The two would find a favorable location for their colony, then gather their community to live under a covenant, the main terms of which would be that

each member of the colony shall consider himself a steward of the Lord, & hold only so much property as he can advantageously manage for the Lord. Every one, regardless of worldly maxims, shall return to Gospel simplicity of dress, diet, houses, and furniture, all appertaining to him, & be industrious & economical with the view of earning & saving as much as possible, not to hoard up for old age, & for children, but to glorify God in the salvation of men: And that no one need to be tempted to hoard up, the colonists (as members of one body, of which Christ is the head), mutually pledge that they will provide in all respects for the widowed, orphan, & all the needy as well as for themselves & households.<sup>52</sup>

“Oberlin” would also include a school in the colony for students of all ages, and importantly, for both sexes, in hopes of one day becoming “an institution which will afford the best education for the Ministry.” Students would work at least four hours a day at an affiliated farm or workshop in order to finance their education. “The hope,” Shipherd wrote, “is that God will call many of the children of the Col[ony] to the Ministry, & to useful stations in the world. The sole aim will be to train them up for usefulness.” In addition to the children of the colony, Shipherd and Stewart planned to educate teachers and ministers for the Ohio Valley drawn “from the four

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Shipherd papers, microfilm, OCA; On John Frederic Obelin, see Luther Halsey, *Memoirs of John Frederic Oberlin* (Pittsburgh, 1832); John W. Kurtz, *John Frederic Oberlin* (Boulder, 1976).

<sup>52</sup> John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, August 13, 1832, RG 30/83, SP, Box 4, OCA; John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, August 6, 1832, reprinted in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 15-16; “Covenant of the Oberlin Colony,” RG 21, VI, Box 1, OCA; W.S. Edwards to J.F. Scoville, December 17, 1833, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 5, OCA; Phillips, *Oberlin Colony*, 13-14, 17; Atwood, “Philo Penfield Stewart,” 432.

winds” to serve in the West, “where most of them ought to labor.”<sup>53</sup> The Oberlin Institute would be the centerpiece of the Oberlin enterprise. All colonists would be committed to the school’s success, since it was to be the most obvious embodiment of their evangelical and revivalist impulse.

Though Shipherd believed that Satan would attempt to frustrate any good work, the initial steps toward realizing his and Stewart’s goals seemed quite simple: raise two thousand dollars for a school, find a tract of land suitable to their purpose, and recruit approximately twenty five pious families to form the core of their settlement.<sup>54</sup> Their faith in God must have been supreme, however, because the two men set out to obtain these necessities one day with nothing more than the clothes they wore, two horses, and an ambitious dream.<sup>55</sup> As one Oberlin resident remembered in his old age, the founders depended more on “faith, rather than wisdom.”<sup>56</sup>

They first rode south into a still-unsettled tract of land in Russia Township. At one point, the men dismounted in order to kneel under an elm tree to pray for God’s guidance. A hunter passing the same way informed the men that not ten minutes earlier, a black bear with two cubs had come down out of the very tree to which they had hitched their horses.<sup>57</sup> Viewing this as a sign of God’s favor, Stewart and Shipherd determined to build their dreams on that spot. It was “sufficiently remote

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<sup>53</sup> John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, August 13, 1832, RG 30/83, SP, Box 4, OCA ; John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, August 6, 1832, reprinted in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 15-16; *The American Quarterly Register*, Vol.VIII (Boston, 1836), 312; *New York Evangelist*, October 1, 1836; John Mercer Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capital, or, The First and Only Negro Representative in Congress from the Old Dominion* (Hartford, 1894), 97-98; W.S. Edwards to J.F. Scoville, December 17, 1833, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 5, OCA.

<sup>54</sup> John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, August 6, 1832, reprinted in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 15-16; Knight and Commons, *Higher Education in Ohio*, 66.

<sup>55</sup> Shipherd, “Life of John Jay Shipherd”; James H. Fairchild, “The Divine Hand in the Oberlin Experiment,” *Jubilee Notes* (November, 1883), 46; Florence N. Jones to Robert S. Fletcher, March 8, 1931, RG 30/24, FP, Box 3, Folder 5, OCA; Atwood, “Philo Penfield Stewart,” 436.

<sup>56</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 97.

<sup>57</sup> Shipherd, “Life of John Jay Shipherd”; See also John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, October 6, 1832, RG 30/83, SP, Box 4, OCA; Atwood, “Philo Penfield Stewart,” 432.

from the vices and temptations of large towns,” the perfect plot on which to train the shock troops for the battle of world regeneration that was to come.<sup>58</sup>

They discovered that the land belonged to two New Haven businessmen. After an inquiry led them to the owners’ local agent in nearby Amherst, Ohio, their quest had its first jolt. Not even a full unfolding of their divine plan to the agent could convince him to freely give them the hundreds of acres of land they requested. The agent, Eliphalet Redington, had full authority to sell the land to able customers, but lacking any funds, Shipherd and Stewart appeared stymied. Redington, however, was so inspired by their plans (and apparently confident in the generosity of the Connecticut businessmen Titus Street and Samuel Hughes), that he urged Shipherd to journey to Connecticut to discuss his scheme with the owners while he and Stewart stayed behind to clear the dense forest, begin construction on the first structures, and welcome any colonists that could be shepherded to their “community.”<sup>59</sup>

Shipherd packed his horse, commended his pregnant wife and three sons to the care of Stewart and his wife, and began his trek east in late fall, far from the ideal traveling season in northwest Ohio.<sup>60</sup> At every town along his route, Shipherd would stop to rest his lame mare and solicit support for Oberlin. Short of moral encouragement, however, little else was offered. Shipherd persisted, yet until he reached Rochester, he complained that he was struggling to “fill the Lord’s treasury.”<sup>61</sup> There, he was finally able to mail Stewart an order for his entire accumulated sum: one hundred and sixty dollars.<sup>62</sup> It was a far cry from the initial

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<sup>58</sup> *The First Annual Report of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute*, (Elyria, 1834), 2.

<sup>59</sup> John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, August 13, 1832, RG 30/83, SP, Box 4, OCA; John J. Shipherd to Zebulon Shipherd, August 6, 1832, reprinted in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 15-16.

<sup>60</sup> Atwood, “Philo Penfield Stewart,” 433.

<sup>61</sup> Shipherd, “Life of John J. Shipherd”; John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, December 10, 17, 1832, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA.

<sup>62</sup> Philo P. Stewart to John J. Shipherd, February 4, 1833, RG 30/24, FP, Box 9, Folder 2, OCA.

two thousand dollar figure, not to mention the fifteen thousand dollar goal that he and Stewart had set later in the planning process.<sup>63</sup>

When he reached New Haven, however, Shipherd's luck began to change. Street and Hughes agreed to donate five hundred acres to the trustees of the Oberlin Institute with the stipulation that it be "forever appropriated to the use of the same." The men also agreed to sell individual Oberlin colonists land from a five thousand acre reserve for \$1.50 an acre for farms of between fifty and one hundred acres each, well below the \$6.00 an acre for which Street and Hughes soon later sold the remainder of their Ohio lands.<sup>64</sup>

Fresh from his successes in Connecticut, Shipherd continued on his tour of New York and New England, recruiting families to remove to Oberlin and gathering the funds necessary for the venture's success. The more he gathered, the greater luck he seemed to have in his collections. Shipherd was able to send to Eliphalet Redington, who was now officially treasurer of the Oberlin Institute board of trustees, gifts ranging from a few dollars to over a hundred.<sup>65</sup> As he moved from town to town, Shipherd often appointed agents to act on the Oberlin venture's behalf, both to recruit emigrants and raise funds for the Institute.<sup>66</sup> Some agents would be coming to Oberlin themselves, and their efforts to collect money, arrange rendezvous points and

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<sup>63</sup> Shipherd, "Life of John J. Shipherd"; John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, December 10, 17, 1832, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA.

<sup>64</sup> Deed of Sale, Hughes and Street, RG 21, VI, Box 1, OCA ; Philo P. Stewart to John J. Shipherd, March 12, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA; *New York Evangelist*, October 1, 1836; Knight and Commons, *Higher Education in Ohio*, 56, 66.

<sup>65</sup> Eliphalet Redington to John J. Shipherd, March 8, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA ; Shipherd, "Life of John J. Shipherd"; Philo P. Stewart to John J. Shipherd, March 12, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA; Eliphalet Redington to John J. Shipherd, May 20, 1833, RG 30/24, FP, Box 14, Folder 7, OCA; John J. Shipherd to the Trustees of the Oberlin Institute, May 28, 1833, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA.

<sup>66</sup> See N. Goss to John J. Shipherd, February 9, April 20, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA; Phineas Bailey to John J. Shipherd, August 12, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA; Asahel Munger to Philo P. Stewart, March 19, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA.

transportation plans for emigrants, and procure supplies for the new school assured Shipherd and Stewart that their dreams would soon become reality.<sup>67</sup>

No one was actually living in Oberlin until the spring of 1833. The original founders had resided in the nearby settlements of Elyria, Brownhelm, and Amherst. The first true colonist of Oberlin was Peter Pindar Pease, a disapproving former acquaintance of author Edgar Allan Poe.<sup>68</sup> Pease moved into his rough house in April, and on his door he conspicuously wrote "I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."<sup>69</sup> He then assumed the job of resident supervisor of land clearing. With axe and fire, he had cleared nearly ten acres by the end of May. He also helped erect another log house, but not before he cut the first road in the forest toward Brownhelm by which an ox team brought his family and personal effects.<sup>70</sup> By mid-June, at least ten families were on the ground in Oberlin, regular religious meetings were taking place, cleared land was under cultivation, roadwork was underway, and a boarding house and steam mill for the use of the school were being raised.<sup>71</sup> The Oberlin church was officially organized in August with a membership of

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<sup>67</sup> Bela Hall to John J. Shipherd, April 2, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA; T.S. Ingersol to John J. Shipherd, March 18, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA.

<sup>68</sup> Theodore Pease Stearns, "A Prohibitionist Shakes Dice with Poe," *Outlook*, September 1, 1920; James Harrison Kennedy, "The Evolution of Oberlin," in *Magazine of Western History*, Vol.XIII, No.3 (January, 1891), 335.

<sup>69</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, April 20, 1853; Knight and Commons, *Higher Education in Ohio*, 58; *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, Vol.II (New York, 1892), 461; David Pease, *A Geneological and Historical record of the Descendants of John Pease* (Springfield, MA, 1869), 196-198; James Jesse Burns, *Educational History of Ohio: A History of its Progress Since the Formation of the State Together with the Portraits and Biographies of Past and Present State Officials* (Columbus, 1905), 334.

<sup>70</sup> Eliphalet Redington to John J. Shipherd, May 20, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA; Philo P. Stewart to John J. Shipherd, May 21, 1833, RG 30/24, FP, Box 14, Folder 7, OCA; Philo P. Stewart to John J. Shipherd, May 25, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 105.

<sup>71</sup> Peter P. Pease, et. al, to John J. Shipherd, June 11, 1833, RG 30/24, FP, Box 9, Folder 2, OCA; Marianne P. Dascomb to Home Friends, May 24, 1834, in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, "Appendix," 329-333.

sixty one people (232 by the end of the year) as “The Congregational Church of Christ at Oberlin.”<sup>72</sup> “Does not this look like a good beginning?” Stewart asked Shipherd.<sup>73</sup>

It did indeed, and an optimistic Shipherd took the progress of the enterprise as a rationale for expanding the original plans of the school, which had yet not even begun classes. As he traveled in the East and discussed Oberlin’s future with potential



**Illustration 1.1: 1933 reconstruction of Peter Pindar Pease cabin  
(Oberlin Heritage Center, ID #0303)**

benefactors, he became convinced of the necessity of extending Oberlin’s course of study to the collegiate level as well as the addition of a theological department.<sup>74</sup>

Even above manual labor, Shipherd regarded intensive theological study as vital to

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<sup>72</sup> Phillips, *Oberlin Colony*, 65; Atwood, “Philo Penfield Stewart,” 433.

<sup>73</sup> Philo P. Stewart to John J. Shipherd, May 25, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA.

<sup>74</sup> John J. Shipherd to Eliphalet Redington, May 1, 1833, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA; Philo P. Stewart to John J. Shipherd, May 25, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA; John J. Shipherd to Philo P. Stewart, May 28, 1833, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA; *The American Quarterly Register*, Vol. VIII (Boston, 1836), 312.



Oberlin's mission. He reminded Stewart that "the revivals of three years past have brot. hundreds of youth into our churches who desire to be educated for the ministry & other useful services" who could only achieve their dreams in a school like the Oberlin Institute which offered manual labor to defray their expenses. "Hundreds of promising youth will doubtless be educated for God's service, or not be educated," he warned, "as we shall or shall not provide them the means of complete education by their own industry & economy."<sup>75</sup>

In the early fall of 1833, Shipherd published the prospectus for the Oberlin Collegiate Institute in various journals from Ohio to the East Coast. "The growing millions of the Mississippi Valley are perishing through want of well qualified ministers and teachers," Shipherd explained to the nation, and "in view of these facts the founders of the Oberlin institute, having waited on God for counsel, and being encouraged by the wise and good, resolved to rise and build." Attendance would be inexpensive, students' education would be first-rate, and manual labor and acclimation to the West would well-prepare them for their challenging missions to come. The founders aimed at the education of the "*whole man*," yet women would be welcome as well when the school's doors opened to students December 3, 1833.<sup>76</sup>

In October, 1834, the Oberlin Institute held its first "commencement" and public examination, proving to observers that "the teachers have been successful in their attempts for a thorough mental discipline."<sup>77</sup> That same day, a mass meeting of colonists declared that they were thoroughly convinced of the success of the Oberlin

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<sup>75</sup> John J. Shipherd to Philo P. Stewart, May 28, 1833, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA; Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 321.

<sup>76</sup> *New York Evangelist*, September 7, 1833; *New York Observer and Chronicle*, August 24, 1833; *Boston Recorder*, August 14, 1833; (New Haven) *Religious Intelligencer*, September 7, 1833; (Utica) *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*, May 3, 1834; Knight and Commons, *Higher Education in Ohio*, 58; Atwood, "Philo Penfield Stewart," 433; Frances Juliette Hosford, *Father Shipherd's Magna Charta: A Century of Coeducation in Oberlin College* (Boston, 1937), 29.

<sup>77</sup> "Commencement Files, 1834," RG 14, XV, Box 1, OCA; Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 46.

mission, and resolved that the Institute was “of immense importance to the scientific, political, and religious interests of this great valley, our nation and the world; and as such ought to be sustained and liberally endowed by the public.”<sup>78</sup>

Yet despite Shipherd’s best advertising efforts, finances remained tight. Though individuals continued to send donations, the sums remained small.<sup>79</sup> Others sent gifts of goods that, though generous, could not pay professors’ salaries.<sup>80</sup> The purchase of scholarships by students’ benefactors was the school’s chief source of income. For \$150, a scholarship could be purchased which would allow its holder to send a student to Oberlin with full use of the Institute: its manual labor facilities, boarding house, etc. Their sale, plus revenues generated by the sale of cooking stoves designed by Philo P. Stewart, largely supported the Oberlin Institute in its earliest years.<sup>81</sup>

That the school was sustained simply meant that it did not immediately go under for lack of funds. By the summer of 1834, Shipherd was lamenting his inability to admit all the students who sought to study at the Oberlin Institute. Some, after

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<sup>78</sup> *The First Annual Report of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute*, (Elyria, 1834), 10.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, Justus Newcombe to John J. Shipherd, July 6, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA, where the author writes on a small scrap of paper, “Although my resources are small and prevent my contributing as much as I could wish. Yet I send you one Dollar as the fruit of said scheme [of religious retrenchment]. Please do receive it for the benefit of your new Institution & my sincere desires for the Prosperity of the same, & the blessing of Heaven upon your labors.”

<sup>80</sup> One Cleveland friend sent along “9 Articles which may be of some value to your establishment,” including one shovel, one pitchfork, one hoe, one “Neck yoke for waggon harness,” one joiner’s plane, one water pail, and one half bushel basket. The same man also offered the Oberlin community a horse, “sired by the *Old Durcock* & a *Flag of Truce*” to use as they saw fit for the interests of the institution and colony. Harmon Kingsbury to John J. Shipherd, July 10, 14, 1834, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA. See also Phillips, *Oberlin Colony*, 70.

<sup>81</sup> “Circular, Oberlin Collegiate Institute,” March 8, 1834, RG 30/24, FP, Box 12, Folder 14, OCA; *New York Evangelist*, September 7, 1833; Philo P. Stewart to John J. Shipherd, March 12, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA; Esther Shipherd to John J. Shipherd, April 8, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA; Atwood, “Philo Penfield Stewart,” 429-432; Philo P. Stewart to John J. Shipherd, March 12, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA; Philo P. Stewart to John J. Shipherd, March, 1833, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA; William J. Keep, *The History of the Stove*, (MSS), n.d., RG 30/24, FP, Box 13, Folder 12, OCA

being informed that the school was already filled to capacity, made the trek to Oberlin anyway, often over hundreds of miles, to beg for admission by promising to “eat anything & sleep on anything” if only Shipherd could make room for them. However, necessity forbade it. “I am under the distressing necessity,” Shipherd remarked to his father, “of rejecting such for want of a few thousand dollars by which I could place them in such circumstances as would through the Lord’s blessing, in a few years send them forth to ‘endure hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ.’”<sup>82</sup> They needed a new boarding house, several other buildings for students’ use, several more professors, and a president, yet lacked the funds necessary to expand.<sup>83</sup> It was clear to the trustees that unless something was done soon to place Oberlin in the black, “the design must fail.”<sup>84</sup>

The crumbling seemed to come on swiftly. Already lacking a sufficient number of teachers and a head administrator, October witnessed the resignation of Henry Brown (founder of the nearby town of Brownhelm) as president of the board of trustees of the struggling school. That same month, the board, fearing the worst, conducted an audit of its finances, but found that the books were in such disarray that confidence even in the accuracy of simple debits and balances was out of the question.<sup>85</sup>

The trustees, in a last desperate effort to stay afloat, once again entrusted John J. Shipherd with the fate of the Oberlin enterprise. As general agent, he was sent on another fundraising mission.<sup>86</sup> And again, Shipherd, the man whom Charles Finney

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<sup>82</sup> John J. Shipherd and Esther Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, June 14, 1834, RG 30/83, SP, Box 4, OCA.

<sup>83</sup> Hosford, *Father Shipherd’s Magna Charta*, 18.

<sup>84</sup> Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 140.

<sup>85</sup> Electa F. Jones, *Stockbridge, Past and Present; or, Records of an Old Mission Station* (Springfield, IL, 1854), 204; G. Frederick Wright, *A Standard History of Lorain County Ohio*, Vol.I (Chicago, 1916), 110; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 139, 167; William Daniel Overman, *Ohio Town Names* (Akron, 1959), 19.

<sup>86</sup> Minutes of the Oberlin College Board of Trustees, September 23, 1834, Microfilm, Roll 1, OCA.

had once called his pioneer to the Valley of Death, headed east on a lame horse, seeking the deep pockets of New York businessmen and the guidance and counsel of the great revivalist.

### ***“THE SUBJECT OF THE SLAVERY QUESTION”***

Finney was already in New York City. The success of his revivals earlier in the decade had convinced wealthy admirers in New York that the revivalist was desperately needed in their “Stupid, Poluted, and Perishing City.”<sup>87</sup> Merchant Lewis Tappan told Finney that he believed the metropolis was “the headquarters of Satan,” and he did not think the necessary revival would take place unless he came back to lead it.<sup>88</sup> “Depend upon it,” he wrote, “a blow must be struck in this city, heavier than anything we have had yet, or the revival will linger, and finally go out.”<sup>89</sup> The Tappans believed at that point, New York *was* America, and they tried to appeal to Finney’s keen sense of utility to draw him there. Lewis Tappan described to Finney the “mighty influence” New York had upon the rest of the country. “The South,” he wrote, “& especially the West, look to this city for moral impulse.” Thousands of people visited New York daily, and each visitor then spread the views he or she gained

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<sup>87</sup> W. Stafford to Charles Grandison Finney, December 31, 1827, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 1, OCA; See also Anson G. Phelps to Charles Grandison Finney, January 7, 1828, July 7, 1828, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 1, OCA; Zephaniah Platt to Charles Grandison Finney, August 6, 1828, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 1, OCA; Arthur Tappan to Charles Grandison Finney, September 25, 1828, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 1, OCA.

<sup>88</sup> Lewis Tappan to Charles Grandison Finney, March 16, 1832, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 3, OCA.

<sup>89</sup> Lewis Tappan to Charles Grandison Finney, April 3, 1831, Lewis Tappan papers, microfilm, roll 6; Bernard A. Weisenberger, *They Gathered at the River: The Story of the Great Revivalists and their Impact Upon Religion in America* (Boston, 1958), 124-125; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 29; Rebecca J. Winter, *The Night Cometh: Two Wealthy Evangelicals Face the Nation* (South Pasadena, 1977), 43.

in city across the country. “A blow struck here,” he assured Finney, “reverberates to the extremities of the republic.”<sup>90</sup>

Finney was convinced, and he soon moved his base of operations to the newly christened Chatham Street Chapel (formerly Chatham Street Theater) in New York City. By this time, Finney said that he had “made up [his] mind on the subject of the slavery question,” and “was exceedingly anxious to arouse public attention to the subject.”<sup>91</sup> Although he did not “make it a hobby” or wish to divert the attention of his congregants from the worthy work of converting souls, antislavery was an important aspect of his ministry.<sup>92</sup> Finney declared in an 1834 sermon that “he could not *recognize* men as [Christians] who trafficked in the bodies and souls of fellow men.”<sup>93</sup> Even more powerful was his refusal as early as 1833 to allow slaveholders to commune in the Chatham Street Chapel.<sup>94</sup> “I do not baptize slavery by some soft and Christian name, if I call it a SIN,” he explained in a sermon, and “its perpetrators cannot be fit subjects for Christian communion and fellowship.”<sup>95</sup>

As Finney waged an all-out war against sin in its myriad forms and insisted on immediate and total repentance on the part of his parishioners, so too did he join other friends of the slave in New York in severely castigating half-hearted and limited schemes for emancipation, especially those of the American Colonization Society (A.C.S.). He realized that many Americans mistakenly viewed the colonization

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<sup>90</sup> Lewis Tappan to Charles Grandison Finney, March 22, 1832, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 3, OCA.

<sup>91</sup> Finney, *Memoirs*, 362.

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> S.A. to Joshua Leavitt, n.d., in *New York Evangelist*, November 8, 1834.

<sup>94</sup> See *New York Evangelist*, November 8, 1834; *Ohio Observer*, November 27, 1834; *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 18, 1852; Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, November 17, 1835, *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld, and Sarah Grimké*, Vol.I, ed. Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. DuMond (New York, 1934), 243-244; Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 277-278; Tappan, “Chronological Resume,” 1834; Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York, 2007), 174; Ward, *History of the Broadway Tabernacle Church*, 27.

<sup>95</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 277.

movement as a “benevolent” organization devoted to the cause of the slave. However, with regard to colonization as in everything else, Finney believed that “sin and holiness are direct opposites.”<sup>96</sup> He attributed the guilt of man’s entire history of slaveholding not only to those who continued to support it, but to those who continued to hedge on its sinfulness and continued to refuse to speak out against it, particularly colonizationists.<sup>97</sup> Finney focused his earliest antislavery efforts in New York on destroying the influence of the A.C.S. among reformers and exposing what he saw as its most contemptible shortcomings.<sup>98</sup>



**Illustration 1.2: Charles Grandison Finney in the mid 1830s  
(from Finney, *Sermons on Important Subjects* (1836))**

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<sup>96</sup> Charles Grandison Finney, *Sermons on Important Subjects* (New York, 1836), 168.

<sup>97</sup> S.A. to Joshua Leavitt, n.d., in *New York Evangelist*, November 8, 1834.

<sup>98</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to James G. Birney, September 27, 1832, *The Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831-1857*, Vol. I, ed. Dwight L. DuMond (Gloucester, MA, 1966), 26-28; Francis P. Weisenberger, *The History of the State of Ohio: Volume III, The Passing of the Frontier* (Columbus, 1941), 366-367.

The defining feature of the colonization movement was the expulsion, or “colonization,” of free African Americans from the United States to Africa. Many Northern philanthropists supported the movement because it was the only national secular organization which had any meaningful influence and approved of emancipation that was available for their patronage (though only on the condition that the freed people emigrate). To most of them, slavery was basically an economic evil, and they opposed it on financial grounds rather than from empathy with the slaves. Southerners also supported colonization for its proposals to rid their society of its unwanted (and supposedly dangerous) free Black population. At its base, however, colonization rested on racism, strengthened slavery, and provided an ideological cover for its expansion. As James G. Birney realized, colonization only allowed slave owners “an opiate to the conscience,” and allowed racist Northerners to congratulate themselves on rescuing “degraded” African Americans from the supposedly “irremediable” prejudice and hatred of American whites.<sup>99</sup>

The most dedicated opponents of colonization were the free African Americans themselves. For most of them, America was their native land, no less than their white neighbors. They felt that they had more than earned the right to stay there. From the organization of the A.C.S. in 1817, many free Black men and women spoke out in thunder tones on the iniquity of colonization schemes, declaring them to be “in direct violation of those principles, which have been the boast of this republic.” They further resolved to never voluntarily abandon the enslaved population of their country, since they were “our brethren by the ties of consanguinity, of suffering, and of

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<sup>99</sup> James G. Birney, *A Letter on Colonization, Addressed to the Rev. Thornton J. Mills, Corresponding Secretary of the Kentucky Colonization Society* (New York, 1834), 20; Joseph Sturge, *A Visit to the United States in 1841*, (London, 1842), cxiii; Tappan, *Life of Arthur Tappan*, 230-231; P.J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865* (Charlottesville, 1980), 229; Goodman, *Of One Blood*, 11-22.

wrong.”<sup>100</sup> They realized that in an emigration scheme like the one proposed by the A.C.S., those still enslaved who were left behind would be “assured perpetual slavery and augmented sufferings.”<sup>101</sup> Rather than lessening the strong spirit of racism which pervaded American society, an 1831 New York African American gathering noted with disgust that colonization schemes assumed it to be unyielding and unchangeable.<sup>102</sup>



**Illustration 1.3: William Lloyd Garrison**  
(from Grimké, *William Lloyd Garrison* (1891))

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<sup>100</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization, or, An Impartial Exhibition of the Doctrines, Principles and Purposes of the American Colonization Society* (Boston, 1832), part II, 9.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*, 12.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*, 16. For more declarations of free African Americans in opposition to the A.C.S. prior to 1832, see “Sentiments of the People of Color,” in William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization, or, An Impartial Exhibition of the Doctrines, Principles and Purposes of the American Colonization Society* (Boston, 1832), part II.



The Northern Black community's most significant convert to the cause of anti-colonization was a young Boston journalist named William Lloyd Garrison. The Quaker editor Benjamin Lundy had opened Garrison's eyes to the evils of slavery, but it was the small community of Black Bostonians who imbued him with "the language of nature—the unbending spirit of liberty" that affirmed that there could be no middle ground between slavery and freedom. By the end of 1830, the counsel of free African Americans had convinced Garrison that any organization that, even for a minute, upheld the institution of slavery was a corrupt one; gradualist schemes for ending slavery were morally and politically appalling. Garrison declared that "there was nothing to stand upon, if it could be granted that slavery was, for a moment, right." If it could be tolerated for a day, then it could endure for a thousand, and like any other grave sin, he realized that it must cease at once.<sup>103</sup>

Encouraged and principally supported financially by free African Americans, Garrison hoped to shock Americans out of their complacency on January 1, 1831 with the publication of the first issue of his newspaper, the *Liberator*. On its first page, Garrison repented of his former support of colonization, begging the pardon "of my God, of my country, and of my brethren the poor slaves, for having uttered a sentiment so full of timidity, injustice, and absurdity." Now, Garrison would bring the cause of immediate emancipation before the attention of the nation each week, assuring his readership that "I *will be* as harsh as truth and as uncompromising as justice." He would unceasingly cry the alarm until slavery had been abolished, mocking his conservative critics who, he wrote, would tell "a man whose house is on fire, to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen."

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<sup>103</sup> Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York, 1998), 65-70.

Garrison declared to his readers that “I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD.”<sup>104</sup> As Garrison’s friend Samuel J. May put it, the great abolitionist was “all on fire.”<sup>105</sup>

Garrison’s clarion call fit well with the evangelical call for immediate repentance that was echoing simultaneously across America. Both were centered around the idea of “perfectionism,” the notion that individuals could choose to live without sin.<sup>106</sup> As these men and women followed the scriptural command to “be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” and converted others to their path, they could potentially form a truly perfect society and commence the kingdom of God on earth, i.e. a world without sin or slavery. As both Charles Finney and Garrison believed, there could be no middle road—no accommodation with sin. Slavery was the most conspicuous sin before America in the early 1830s, and it had to be swept away completely and immediately.

Many of Finney’s followers soon proved to be some of the most enthusiastic supporters of immediate emancipation. As Finney’s famous Rochester revival was at its peak, a local newspaper gave favorable notice to the first edition of the *Liberator*,

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<sup>104</sup> *Liberator*, January 1, 1831.

<sup>105</sup> Samuel Joseph May, *Memoir of Samuel Joseph May* (Boston, 1873), 148.

<sup>106</sup> The idea of perfectionism was as old as Christianity itself, and the command to strive to live without sin could be found in numerous scriptural passages. In its modern sense, “perfectionism” as a doctrine originated with John Wesley and the bishops he sent to America in the 1760s-80s. Wesley described the striving for perfectionism as a process by which the “dispositions of the heart” are changed, where the love for holy things grows, and where the temptation of evil slowly declines. There were also similar traces of perfectionism in the early Baptist, Quaker, and Unitarian traditions. Finney expanded these ideas in his preaching during his revivals in the late 1820s and early 1830s. Once sinners became aware of their sin, he said, it was his or her obligation to immediately repent. True repentance encouraged one to constantly choose good over evil. Finneyites called this perfectionist process of self-mastery of sinful desires “sanctification.” As individuals throughout society committed themselves to striving for a sanctified life, that conformity to God’s laws would eventually become pervasive, and the millennium would commence. Individuals, and by extension society, could be transformed. Perfectionism would become the single most important concept espoused by abolitionists in the decades to come, though it would be interpreted in several different ways. These will be discussed in more detail in later chapters. See Richard G. Kyle, *Evangelicalism: An Americanized Christianity* (New Brunswick, 2006), 71-74; Douglas M. Strong, *Perfectionist Politics: Abolitionism and the Religious Tensions of American Democracy* (Syracuse, 2002), 26-29; Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 14-15.

and not long thereafter, it chronicled the formation by influential Finneyites George A. Avery and Samuel D. Porter of the Rochester Anti-Slavery Society, made up of all those “friendly to the *Immediate* abolition of *Slavery*,” in the city’s Third Church.<sup>107</sup>

In New York, Finney was right in the center of one of the dual capitals of the budding antislavery movement in America. Garrison’s journalistic and literary efforts were striking bright sparks in Boston, and Finney’s New York benefactors held the purse strings to the benevolent empire, including the temperance and peace movements, the American Sunday School Union, the American Bible Society, and other moral reform organizations. As the New Yorkers began informal discussions among themselves about immediatism, they also came to Garrison’s conclusion that colonization was an insufficient and unprincipled solution to the blight of American slavery.<sup>108</sup> The *New York Evangelist* reported as early as September of 1831 that “men of wealth and influence” were about organizing an “American National Anti-Slavery Society,” and it soon became clear in the paper’s pages that there was considerable opposition to colonization among the philanthropic New York elite.<sup>109</sup> Through the *Evangelist*, New York reformers stressed that “colonizationists and abolitionists cannot walk together.”<sup>110</sup>

Their fresh faith demanded immediate and complete abolition of the sin of slavery, and the gradualist hedging of colonizationists was unacceptable. Finney reminded his Chathan Street congregation that the notion of gradual repentance or “partial repentance” was “nonsense.” How could a man “both turn away from and hold on to sin at the same time?”<sup>111</sup> Since slavery was clearly as sin *at that very*

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<sup>107</sup> O’Reilly, *Settlement in the West*, 316; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 145-146; William Farley Peck, *History of Rochester and Monroe County, New York: From the Earliest Historical Times to the Beginning of 1907*, Vol.I (New York, 1908), 287-288.

<sup>108</sup> Barnes, *Antislavery Impulse*, 35-36; Goodman, *Of One Blood*, 11-22.

<sup>109</sup> *New York Evangelist*, September 10, 1831, March 10, 1832.

<sup>110</sup> *New York Evangelist*, May 3, 1834.

<sup>111</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, 150-173, 174-187.

*moment*, there was no excuse for letting it survive another day or hour or minute.

Finney told his New York congregation in 1834 that “this monster is dragged from his horrid den, and exhibited before the church, and it is demanded of them, ‘IS THIS SIN?’” Their response should be nothing but a resounding yes, he argued, and through their words and actions, they were bound to “testify ‘the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.’”<sup>112</sup>

In March of 1833, Finney, along with Arthur and Lewis Tappan, Theodore Weld, the editor of the *Evangelist* Joshua Leavitt, and others, directly confronted the A.C.S. over its duplicity. In an attempt to embarrass the A.C.S. and expose its shortcomings to true reform-minded Americans, they demanded in a public letter that the Society explain its position on the “complete extinction of Slavery” in the United States and whether expatriation was the absolute necessity which must follow the emancipation of enslaved African Americans. The reply they received from A.C.S. Secretary Ralph Gurley was, as they expected, evasive, imprecise, and unsatisfactory. He stumbled over questions of semantics before denying that the Society sought to effect emancipation at all by any influence it could or would exert.<sup>113</sup>

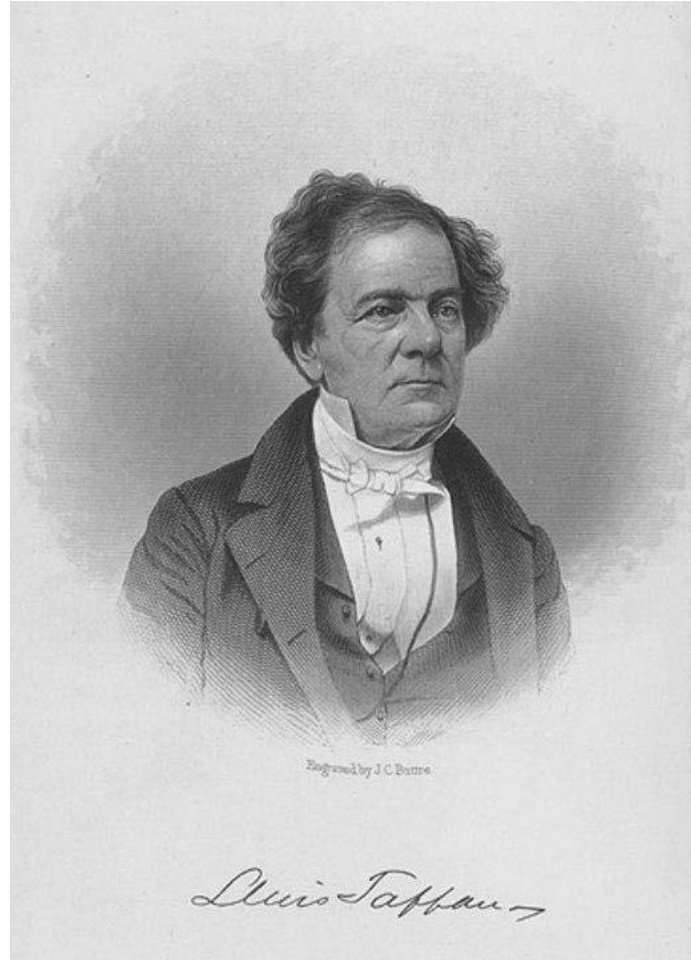
Thoroughly convinced that colonization and other gradualist schemes were not the answer, New York philanthropists met in Finney’s Chatham Street Chapel on October 2, 1833 to found the New York Anti-Slavery Society, based on the principle of “immediate emancipation, gradually achieved.” Their goal was to inspire men and women to immediately repent of the sin of slavery as well as immediately commence efforts to remedy the wrong. Their program implied that the process of ending slavery once and for all must begin “now” rather than “someday,” and though their plans were not specific, they demanded at the very least an immediate declaration of

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<sup>112</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 266.

<sup>113</sup> *Liberator*, July 13, 1833.

emancipation followed by a series of steps to prepare freed slaves for full citizenship. What was clear to all immediatists was that slavery should immediately be recognized as a sin and that emancipation should be immediately declared as the only just principle.<sup>114</sup>



**Illustration 1.4: Lewis Tappan**  
(from Griffith, *Autographs for Freedom* (1854))

The New York abolitionists met secretly, barely avoiding a mob that had gathered at their planned convention location. Even as they quickly organized

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<sup>114</sup> Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* (New York, 1997), 70; Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York, 1994), 463; David F. Ericson, *The Debate Over Slavery: Antislavery and Proslavery Liberalism in Antebellum America* (New York, 2000), 180; Gerda Lerner, *The Grimke Sisters of South Carolina: Pioneers for Women's Rights and Abolition* (New York, 1998), 86-87.

themselves and elected Arthur Tappan president, a mob of nearly 3000 had gathered outside, shouting “*Garrison, Garrison, Tappan, Tappan, where are they, find them, find them.*” Garrison was not even in the state. Just as the abolitionists escaped through the back door, the anti-abolitionist faction forced its way into the now-empty building, carrying with them torches and an elderly African American man they had grabbed from the street. Hanging a sign reading “Arthur Tappan” from his neck, they forced him to stand before the raucous throng and attempt to convene it as the New York Anti-Slavery Society. They then passed a series of mock resolutions, including one demanding “immediate amalgamation.”<sup>115</sup>

The fallout in New York City from the abolitionist agitation troubled Finney. He approved of the basic motives of the New York abolitionists—his own perfectionism demanded it—but he was not always in agreement on the tactics. He disapproved of those who would make antislavery their single concern at the expense of what he saw as the more important work of saving souls.<sup>116</sup> Slaveholding was a heinous sin, and he clearly considered it one of the most grave. However, to Finney, the smallest sin was no less a sin than the greatest. An evil proslavery mindset was but one of many that would fall away whenever a man or woman was fully and genuinely saved.

What Finney desired was to make abolition an “appendage” of revivalism, just as he had done earlier with temperance in Rochester. Despite what Lewis Tappan, some of his associates, and many historians would later suggest, this did not make Finney any less an abolitionist or a racist.<sup>117</sup> Tappan had called Finney a “coward”

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<sup>115</sup> *Liberator*, October 12, 19, November 2, 23, 1833; Phillip Hone, *The Diary of Phillip Hone, 1828-1851*, ed. Bayard Tuckerman (New York, 1889), 79-80; Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney*, 143; Leonard L. Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing: Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York, 1970), 30-31.

<sup>116</sup> Finney, *Memoirs*, 362.

<sup>117</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, April 5, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I:286-289. See also Dorothy Sterling, *Ahead of her Time: Abby Kelley and the Politics of Antislavery* (New York, 1991), 46;

and “afraid,” and accused him of “sinning against conviction” for exhibiting what he thought was hesitancy to do all in his power for abolition. He specifically cited Finney’s opposition to his biracial mixing of the Chatham Street Chapel’s choir while Finney was away.<sup>118</sup> A distressed Theodore Weld was forced to come to Finney’s aid.

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Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (Cleveland, 1969), 177-178; *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People*, ed. Murrin, et al (Belmonty, 2009), 301-302; Chris Padgett, “Evangelicals Divided: Abolition and the Plan of Union’s Demise in Ohio’s Western Reserve,” in *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery*, ed. John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay (Athens, 1998), 254; Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York, 2000), 32-34. Actually, in Finney’s many denouncement’s of Ohio’s Black Laws after he arrived in Oberlin in 1835, he invoked the “equalizing” notion of the Golden Rule and loving one’s neighbor as one’s self. See *Oberlin Evangelist*, March 13, 1839.

<sup>118</sup> Finney believed that the sin of slavery did not always extend to racial prejudice. He considered it more a matter of personal “constitutional taste,” and understood the issue to be one of the fundamental obstacles to emancipation in the United States. Though the efforts of colonizationist editors to whip up violent opposition to the abolitionists, growing unrest among white workers who were having to compete with African Americans for jobs, and bare racism also contributed to the New York City riots of 1834-1835, the Tappans’ “amalgamation” of the Chatham Street choir had also caused an uproar. Adding fuel to the fire was the rumor that African American Rev. Peter Williams had married an interracial couple in his church (his church and home were ransacked during the riots). Finney believed that the sin of slavery could not be exposed as powerfully as it could be if the populace was thrown into a frenzy over what he called a “collateral point.” It “distracted the public attention with two questions at the same time instead of one,” and just like a successful revival, the only way to “consummate[e] an excitement & public action upon any subject” was to “confine the public mind to a point.” In Finney’s eyes, the “collateral points” of the Tappans diverted the public attention away from the sin of slaveholding. Finney never expressed a personal dislike for those of another race, yet his commands to his followers to “love thy neighbor as thyself” are legion, and he criticized colleagues who had “not wholly renounced the hateful prejudice against the people of color that so generally prevailed in the country and in the churches.” He explained his opposition to the Tappans’ measures in a letter to Arthur Tappan by asserting that he was “unwilling to see the indignation & rage of the lawless mob excited against” the free African Americans of New York and elsewhere. Lewis Tappan refused to read this letter from Finney.

Lewis Tappan, it should be noted, had a habit of accusing other abolitionists of racism and remaining blind to his own prejudices. He accused Theodore Dwight Weld, easily one of the most avowed egalitarians in the movement, of racial prejudice in 1836, to which Weld had to reply “Really, after so long a time I must forsooth solemnly avow my principles on this subject!” However, it was the Tappans, on behalf of the American Anti-Slavery Society, who signed and circulated a handbill during the 1834 riots that explicitly disclaimed “any desire to promote or encourages intermarriages between white and colored persons” (Tappan later described this publication as “ill advised”). Likewise, Finney and other victims of Lewis Tappan’s caprice also pointed to the glaring fact that the Tappans never hired African Americans as employees in their mercantile business in New York City. See Charles Grandison Finney to Arthur Tappan, April 30, 1836, Charles Grandison Finney papers, Microfilm, OCA; Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, March 9, 15, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I:270-277; Tappan, “Chronological Resume,” 1834; Tappan, *Life of Arthur Tappan*, 250-241; Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing*, 121-122; *Twelfth Annual Report of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society* (New York, 1852), 29-30; Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States* (Chicago, 1965), 229; Elise Virginia Lemire, “*Misegination*”: *Making Race in America* (Philadelphia, 2002), 58-63.

He assured Tappan that the evangelist had demonstrated “more frequent and more striking exhibitions of courage physical and moral than in any other man living,” and that the only thing that he had ever been afraid of was “doing *wrong*.” “I believe,” Weld wrote, “that he is an abolitionist in full...*as he conscientiously believed was his duty*.” It was no sin for Finney to stress revivals as his absorbing passion. Indeed, Weld cautioned Tappan that Finney could justifiably criticize the two of them for not praying enough, lacking sufficient faith, and not encouraging revivals to a proper degree. That, in Weld’s mind, gave Finney “far more reason for the upbraiding than you have for upbraiding him” for what Tappan had called “his coldness and unfaithfulness to the cause of antislavery.”<sup>119</sup>

Even as a revivalist, however, a primary question before Finney remained “How can we save our country and affect the speedy abolition of slavery?” His solution was to instruct his followers to first make things right with God, then “every new convert will be an abolitionist of course.” Though overly optimistic, Finney thought that conversion to immediatism would be the visible proof of a new life in Christ, not a substitute for it. His own methods for ending slavery would produce the same result, yet reach it without the “wave of blood” which he saw as threatening to undo in a minute what God built up over months and years.<sup>120</sup>

Finney laid out the facts and begged his friend Weld to tell him if he was mistaken. In Rochester, he had begun his efforts almost alone as an evangelist. Then, he claimed, 100,000 were converted in a single year, “every one of which was a temperance man.” The same would now be the case with abolition. The *Rochester Observer* realized that Finney’s use of temperance in 1831 had been “a ‘new measure’

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<sup>119</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, November 17, 1835, *Weld Letters*, I:243-244.

<sup>120</sup> Charles Grandison Finney to Theodore Dwight Weld, July 21, 1836, *Weld Letters*, 1:318-319; James David Essig, “The Lord’s Free Man: Charles G. Finney and his Abolitionism,” *Civil War History* 24 (March, 1978), 32.



for the promotion of revivals.”<sup>121</sup> Now, an emphasis on the slavery issue could be a most useful tool of his New York mission, just so long as the cart did not come before the horse. With the help of Weld and a handful of Finney’s “Holy Band” promoting revivalism *and* its adjunct antislavery, he believed that he could “move the whole land” to abolitionism in two years. “Abolition,” he wrote, “can be carried with more dispatch and with infinitely more safety in this indirect than in any other way.” The Tappans and other abolitionist leaders were good men, Finney informed Weld, “but there are but few of them *wise* men.”<sup>122</sup>

Nothing better illustrates Finney’s perfectionist abolitionism than his refusal to allow slaveholders communion in his Chatham Street Chapel by 1833.<sup>123</sup> Not just reckless abolitionists, but also sinful dealers in human flesh could disrupt God’s revival. National divisions over slavery, even at this early date, seemed to threaten war, and Finney could not help but see the impending conflict as God’s wrath upon those who refused to repent of the sin of slaveholding. War would wipe out revivals even more quickly than what he saw as careless abolitionist agitation. “We must DO RIGHT,” Finney urged, and reform the church, for “if the church will not feel...where shall we look for help?”<sup>124</sup> The purification of the divine process by refusing communion to slaveholders was designed by Finney to demonstrate the seriousness of the sin of slavery and the importance of *total* repentance. He preached that those who opposed benevolent ventures like antislavery were also guilty of all of the attempts ever made to frustrate the conversion of the world to Christianity. In fact, those who

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<sup>121</sup> Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, 179.

<sup>122</sup> Charles Grandison Finney to Theodore Dwight Weld, July 21, 1836, *Weld Letters*, 1:318-319.

<sup>123</sup> *New York Evangelist*, November 8, 1834; *Ohio Observer*, November 27, 1834; *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 18, 1852; Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, November 17, 1835, *Weld Letters*, I:243-244; Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 277-278; Tappan, “Chronological Resume,” 1834; Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York, 2007), 174; Ward, *History of the Broadway Tabernacle Church*, 27.

<sup>124</sup> Finney, *Revivals of Religion*, 283-284.

opposed the Christian endeavor of abolitionism were guilty of “*all the opposition to [Christ] that has ever been made.*” This was an unequivocal demand for immediate emancipation, and one particular slaveholder whom Finney rebuked later said that though the preacher “was rather hard” on him, ultimately agreed that “*he was right.*”<sup>125</sup>

Still, Finney’s opinions as to the subordination of explicit abolitionism to broad revivalism were just that, his own personal beliefs. He did not attempt to force his privileging of revivalism over abolitionism upon those whose predispositions differed from his own. In fact, few of his associates and followers could bring themselves to wholeheartedly agree with him.<sup>126</sup> The fact of the matter was, many of those who had been converted to the immediatist lifestyle under Finney’s influence believed that they could best serve the Kingdom of God through their skills as abolitionists.<sup>127</sup> If they were successful, they could bring *millions* to God. Finney had taught them that unless a person possessed free will, he or she had no freedom at all, and was therefore not a free moral agent.<sup>128</sup> Once slavery was abolished, these followers reasoned, nearly the entire African American population, then enslaved, would have their completely denied personal free will restored to them. In freedom they become the morally responsible agents God called them to be. It was a substantial number of Finney converts who swept across the nation in 1835 undertaking the most successful abolitionist blitz before the Civil War.

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<sup>125</sup> *New York Evangelist*, November 8, 1834. Finneyites across the North continued to do everything they could to purge the church of slaveholding. See Marks, *Memoirs*, 359-362.

<sup>126</sup> James Alvord wrote to Weld, begging him to advise them on whether they should go into the abolition field or concentrate on revivals. “We know Mr. Finney’s feelings,” he relayed to Weld, “But he refuses to advise us.” Finney would lay out his case, but free will dictated that each must make up his or her own mind. See William T. Allan, Sereno W. Streeter, J.W. Alvord, and James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, August 9, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I:323-329; James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, February 7, 1839, *Weld Letters*, I:750-753.

<sup>127</sup> See William T. Allan, Sereno W. Streeter, J.W. Alvord, and James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, *Weld Letters*, I:323-329.

<sup>128</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, 27.

As Southern intransigence became more offensive in the mid 1830s, Finney seemed to come around to the more radical position of the Tappans and others on abolition's privileged place in revivalism. He admonished his followers "God forbid that we should be silent" rather than constantly rebuke slaveholders, never mind the consequences. Abolition required *constant* agitation, and so long as it was not done *to the detriment* of revivalism, all was well. "Are we to hold our peace," he asked, "and be partakers in the sin of slavery, by connivance, as we have been? God Forbid." Instead, Finney commanded his followers to constantly speak of it, bear testimony against it, and pray about it, "and complain of it to God and man.—Heaven shall know, and the world shall know, and Hell shall know, that we protest against the sin, and will continue to rebuke it, till it is broken up."

Still, Finney remained troubled by the anarchy that conservative New Yorkers had unleashed upon New York City in response to abolitionist agitation. His anxiety was compounded by physical weakness and the lingering effects of his 1832 bout with cholera. It had been nearly two and a half years since his undeniable successes at Rochester, and he feared he did not have the physical strength to save his New York congregation from the destruction which seemed imminent at the hands of the anti-abolitionist mobs. He considered taking an extended vacation to England or South America, but on January 20, 1834, Finney boarded the Mediterranean-bound brig *Padang*.<sup>129</sup> He hoped that by the time he returned, his health and calm in the city would have returned.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Lewis Tappan to Mrs. Finney, June 7, 1834, Lewis Tappan papers, microfilm, roll 6.

<sup>130</sup> Finney, *Memoirs*, 371-373; Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney*, 144-145.

***“GOD HAS FINALLY OPENED A DOOR TO OUR INFANT SEMINARY”***

John J. Shipherd was not aware of Finney’s departure when he set out from Oberlin in search of the revivalist’s guidance and on the mission that many Oberlinites thought could be the final life-saving mission for the college. When Shipherd and his horse limped away from northwestern Ohio, the school’s debts were in arrears, it was in desperate need of more sufficient facilities, its board of trustees was deserting, monetary relief did not seem forthcoming, and its first annual report reflected the dismal state of college administration—conspicuous blanks stood beside the office of president and the professorships of mathematics and natural philosophy.<sup>131</sup>

Shipherd headed first to Cincinnati, which he reached only after sending his “balky sullen horse” back to Oberlin and completing the rest of the trek in the back of a jostling mail wagon. On the way, he encountered the son of Oberlin Institute trustee John Keep in Columbus, who was able to confirm fascinating rumors which Shipherd had heard echoing across the Ohio countryside. It seemed that a large group of theological students at Cincinnati’s Lane Seminary had been expelled for their insistence on debating the merits of immediate emancipation, the formation of their own antislavery society, and for integrating themselves into Cincinnati’s Black community. Shipherd’s friend Theodore Dwight Weld had been the leader of the Lane Rebels (as they were called), and some prominent Lane professors and trustees had resigned their posts in support of these students. The younger Keep had intended to enroll at Lane, but was returning home to Oberlin after discovering the disappointing and unacceptable state of affairs at the Cincinnati school. Shipherd, alert to the potential of administrators, professors, theological students, and monetary

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<sup>131</sup> *The First Annual Report of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute* (Elyria, 1834), 1; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 167.

support without a home base, hurried south to suggest Oberlin as an ideal solution to the problem.<sup>132</sup>

Shipherd was welcomed into the home of his old friend Asa Mahan. Formerly a member of Finney's Western New York "Holy Band," Mahan now occupied a pulpit in Cincinnati and had recently resigned from the Lane Board of Trustees over its anti-abolitionist stand. His was also the temporary home of Maria Fletcher, daughter of Oberlin Institute trustee Nathan P. Fletcher, while she taught at Cincinnati's "Select female school for colored ladies."<sup>133</sup>

As Shipherd was relaxing from his trek, a group of the former Lane students arrived to call on Mahan. After being introduced to Shipherd and being appraised of his Oberlin mission, the young theologians filled in the details of the "Lane Rebellion," as it was already being called.<sup>134</sup> They quickly confirmed Shipherd's hunch that he had stumbled upon circumstances which could save his beloved Oberlin and the missionary dreams it was founded upon. Here were some of the West's finest scholars, abolitionists to a man, who were already firmly committed to the Western missionary endeavor. Arthur Tappan had also pledged his willingness to follow the young abolitionists with his vast wealth wherever they went. The students saw in Shipherd a man of strong convictions, an avowed advocate of immediate emancipation, and a man who could provide them with an institution in which to complete their theological studies in a liberal atmosphere. To Shipherd's further delight, they insisted that Mahan and their former Lane professor John Morgan

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<sup>132</sup> John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, November 23, 1834, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 2, OCA; John J. Shipherd to Nathan P. Fletcher, November 27, 1834, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA; John J. Shipherd to John Keep, December 13, 1834, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA; Mahan, *Autobiography*, 191.

<sup>133</sup> Edward H. Madden and James E. Hamilton, *Freedom and Grace: The Life of Asa Mahan* (Metuchen, NJ, 1982), 45.

<sup>134</sup> Mahan, *Autobiography*, 190.

accompany them to Oberlin, the former as the president Shipherd so desperately sought and the latter as a professor of mathematics.

Shipherd wrote to Eliphalet Redington in Oberlin, “I believe God has here put my hand on the end of a chain linking men & money to our dear Seminary in such a manner as will fill our hearts with gratitude & gladness when it is fully developed.”<sup>135</sup> To John Keep he rejoiced that “God has kindly opened a door to our infant seminary, wide & effectual, thro’ which I sanguinely hope, it will send forth a multitude of well qualified laborers into the plenteous harvest of our Lord.”<sup>136</sup> Shipherd was right on all counts. Oberlin was poised to become the focal point of some of the most radical and progressive ideas and dreams of the age, and by the time Shipherd returned to Ohio in early 1835, the landscape of American education and social reform would be forever changed.

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<sup>135</sup> John J. Shipherd to Eliphalet Redington, December 15, 1834, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA.

<sup>136</sup> John J. Shipherd to John Keep, December 13, 1834, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *“Finneyism, Abolitionism, etc.”: The Beginnings of an Antislavery Community*

John J. Shipherd felt that he was acting as an instrument of God’s will in the founding of the Oberlin community in 1833. Even as he struggled to keep his enterprise afloat in 1834, he did not mistake the hand of God in bringing him to Cincinnati and the home of his friend, minister and abolitionist Asa Mahan. There he met the Lane Rebels, a group of theological students who had been expelled from Cincinnati’s Lane Seminary for their abolitionist agitation. In these young men, as well as their sympathetic professor John Morgan, Mahan, and their preferred professor of theology Charles Grandison Finney, Shipherd saw the future of his Oberlin dreams. With the group, he began the work to bring his aspirations to fruition.

In their way, however, stood many obstacles. The timid Oberlin community initially balked at the groups’ demand that the Oberlin Institute admit African American students. Outside of Oberlin, more vicious racists set snares at every step. However, after a season of soul-searching, the community approved the measures which would create the first institute of higher learning open to men and women of all races. With a faculty made up of perfectionists and abolitionists who would also become the town’s leaders, Oberlin and the Oberlin Collegiate Institute arose as the great hope of abolitionism and salvation in the West.

### ***THE LANE DEBATES***

Theodore Dwight Weld had been sent in 1832 by Arthur Tappan to find a suitable site for a manual labor theological seminary in the West.<sup>1</sup> After relaying to

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld, *First Annual Report of the Society for Promoting Manual Labor in Literary Institutions, Including the Report of Their General Agent, Theodore D. Weld* (New York, 1833), v-viii;

Tappan his discovery of the charming Lane Seminary already in existence in Cincinnati, the two began a recruiting blitz that, assisted no doubt by Tappan's sizeable endowment, attracted prominent scholars into the faculty to augment the selection of the eminent Rev. Lyman Beecher as its president.<sup>2</sup> Weld told the Tappans that many young men from the Oneida Institute in New York would be entering Lane, and he was convinced that he could also promote antislavery views among the students.<sup>3</sup> He entered Lane as a student himself in 1833, though even Beecher thought of him as more of a faculty member or colleague.<sup>4</sup>

Weld had been converted by Charles Grandison Finney in a revival in Utica, New York in the winter of 1826, and had joined his "Holy Band" in Rochester in 1830-1831 to preach temperance as an adjunct of the revival.<sup>5</sup> There, one of the primary ways in which individual salvation led to a commitment to continuing reform was the connection of the temperance movement to the revival. After an especially thunderous four hour New Year's Eve lecture by Weld, Rochester liquor merchants smashed their barrels in the street or poured their amber contents into the canal as an important step on the way to complete repentance.<sup>6</sup>

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Lewis Tappan to Charles Grandison Finney, August 17, 1832, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 3, OCA; Gilbert Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York, 1933), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Tappan, *The Life of Arthur Tappan* (New York, 1871), 225, 223, 235-237, 421.

<sup>3</sup> The Oneida Institute had been founded by the Reverend George Washington Gale in 1827 as a manual labor institution to prepare recruits from the Finney revivals for mission work in the West. It earned a reputation as an uncompromising foe of the American Colonization Society, and admitted African American students alongside whites. Tappan, *Life of Arthur Tappan*, 225; Lyman Beecher, *The Autobiography, Correspondence, Etc., of Lyman Beecher, D.D.*, Vol.II, ed. Charles Beecher (New York, 1865), 314; On Oneida, see Milton C. Sernett, *Abolition's Axe: Beriah Green, Oneida Institute, and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Syracuse, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Beecher believed Theodore Dwight Weld "was a genius...In the estimation of the class, he was president. He took the lead of the whole institution." Beecher, *Autobiography*, II:320-321.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Grandison Finney to Theodore Dwight Weld, July 21, 1836, in *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld, and Sara Grimke, 1822-1844*, Vol.I, ed. Gilbert Barnes and Dwight DuMond (New York, 1934), 318-320.

<sup>6</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Charles Grandison Finney, March 2, 1831, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 2, OCA; Charles Grandison Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*, ed. Garth M. Rosell and Richard R.G. DuPuis (Grand Rapids, 1989), 188, 299-327; Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, 1996), 111-112; Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in*





**Illustration 2.1: Theodore Dwight Weld**  
 ((from Garrison, et. al, *William Lloyd Garrison,*  
 1805-1879 (1885))

From the moment he arrived in Cincinnati, however, Weld realized that the most urgent and likely vehicle for regeneration in that place was antislavery. Nestled within a city dripping with racism and just a stone's throw from the slave state of Kentucky, Lane had historically been committed to colonization as the only solution to what most students and faculty admitted was a legitimate social problem. Huntington Lyman later remembered that, at best, most people at Lane believed that slavery was somehow wrong, but by no means were they ready to pronounce it a sin.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, many of the most wealthy and influential Lane students were from slaveholding

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*Rochester, New York, 1815-1827* (New York, 1978), 113-115; Benjamin Thomas, *Theodore Weld: Crusader for Freedom* (New Brunswick, 1950), 20-22; Robert Abzug, *Passionate Liberator: Theodore Dwight Weld and the Dilemma of Reform* (New York, 1980), 56-58; Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York, 1998), 96; Barnes, *Anti-Slavery Impulse*, 206.  
<sup>7</sup> Huntington Lyman, "Lane Seminary Rebels," in *Oberlin Jubilee*, ed. W.G. Ballantine (Oberlin, 1883), 62.

families in the South. Weld was well-aware of how important the conversions of the most obvious and leading sinners could be to revival success.<sup>8</sup> His declarations in his correspondence with Finney made clear his prioritization of the West as the stage for the battle for America's soul, and Weld made Lane the headquarters for his "revival in benevolence."<sup>9</sup> He was so convinced that Lane was the best place to strike a blow at slavery that he turned down an appointment as a New York City agent of the newly formed American Anti-Slavery Society because of his engagements in Cincinnati.<sup>10</sup>

From the beginning, Weld began preparing the way for an open discussion of immediate emancipation.<sup>11</sup> He and his newly arrived abolitionist friends from Oneida spoke hardly of anything else to other Lane students from the moment of their arrival in early 1832. Once they had perceived where most of the student body stood on the topic, the abolitionists scheduled a series of debates. However, it was not to be a simple debate on the pros and cons of abolitionism. Elizur Wright, Jr., Corresponding Secretary of the American Anti-Slavery Society, rejoiced that Weld had prepared a "line of attack for a general pitched battle with the colonizationists," who, notably remained the majority among Lane students.<sup>12</sup> Many of the "*determined* colonizationists," like obstinate sinners in the vicinity of a revival, initially refused to attend the debates.<sup>13</sup> With regards to them, Weld and his associates took Finney's advice on how to deal with "*careless* sinners" as individuals. They approached them while they were alone, and respectfully and solemnly laid out their concerns. If

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<sup>8</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, March 18, 1834, *Weld Letters*, I: 132-135; Henry Brewster Stanton, *Random Recollections* (New York, 1885), 46-48; *Debate at the Lane Seminary, Cincinnati* (Boston, 1834), 1-16.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, *Theodore Weld*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Elizur Wright, Jr. to Theodore Dwight Weld, February 20, 1834, *Weld Letters*, I:128-130; Paul Goodman, "The Manual Labor Movement and the Origins of Abolitionism," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 13(Fall, 1993), 355.

<sup>11</sup> Beecher, *Autobiography*, II:322.

<sup>12</sup> Elizur Wright to Theodore Dwight Weld, November 2, 1833, in *Weld Letters*, I:119; Stanton, *Random Recollections*, 48; Lawrence Thomas Lesick, *The Lane Rebels: Evangelicalism and Antislavery in Antebellum America* (Metuchen, NJ, 1980), 77.

<sup>13</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, March 18, 1834, *Weld Letters*, I:132-135.

rebuffed, they never conceded the point, and refused to maintain the sinner “in the controversy against his Maker.”<sup>14</sup> They may not have converted everyone before the debates began, but they planted the seeds of discord in the minds of them all. Nobody could escape participation.

President Lyman Beecher was alerted to the students’ debate plans, and he even initially agreed to participate in the discussions. Since he incongruously considered himself both a colonizationist and abolitionist (though by no means an immediatist) “without perceiving in myself any inconsistency,” he assumed that his would be a moderating voice in the discussions.<sup>15</sup> However, the trustees soon decided that the topic was too controversial and “divisive” to allow it to disrupt pupils’ studies. They worried that it could also appear to commit the school to an opinion of which the majority of the community were adamantly opposed.<sup>16</sup> Beecher informed the students of the board’s decision, and Weld in turn informed the faculty that they would go on with the debates as planned.<sup>17</sup>

What followed was a thorough discussion of two questions: “Ought the people of the Slave holding States to abolish Slavery immediately?” and secondly, “Are the doctrines, tendencies, and measures of the American Colonization Society, and the influence of its principle supporters, such as render it worthy of the patronage of the Christian public?” Each question was debated for nine evenings, and over the protracted course of the nearly three weeks of debate, nearly all of the Lane students and many of the faculty were able to witness at least some part of the proceedings.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *New York Evangelist*, April 5, 1834; Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, March 18, 1834, *Weld Letters*, I:132-135; Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (New York, 1835), 144-160.

<sup>15</sup> Beecher, *Autobiography*, II: 323-324.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, II:324; Tappan, *Life of Arthur Tappan*, 226-228.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *New York Evangelist*, March 22, April 5, 1834; Theodore Dwight Weld to James Hall, May 20, 1834, in *Weld Letters*, I:137-147; *Debate at the Lane Seminary*, 1-15; Lesick, *The Lane Debates*, 79.

The debates went on like a revival. In fact, many of the Rebels had themselves been converted at Finney revivals only a few years earlier and were well-versed in the workings of revivalism.<sup>19</sup> Weld and the other speakers, already experienced in promoting “New Measures,” laid out their case in straightforward language like lawyers before a jury.<sup>20</sup> They presented the unconverted with copious facts about abolition and colonization as well as the realities of slavery, hoping to develop empathy between the hearers and the arguer. The most effective revivalists believed that facts were the key to conversion, and however sinners attempted to “evade the Bible” they most often found it quite difficult to resist clear facts, especially when the facts somehow touched their own lives.<sup>21</sup> Scions of slaveholders and sons of the South would have been their first targets. Once converted, those formerly entangled with slavery gave their own testimony of the barbarity of the system from personal experience and became some of the most effective speakers. Though their pleas may have been embellished at times with hearsay gleaned from their recent anti-slavery reading, the facts of slavery were presented for all to consider: visions of the bloody whips, cries of agony, stillborn babies, severed body parts, and red-hot brands moved students with great effect. “The facts developed in the debate have almost curdled my blood,” one student wrote home, and he noted that “Facts are the great instruments of conviction on this question.”<sup>22</sup>

The early transformation of William T. Allan is representative. He was the son of an Alabama slaveholder, raised in the South amidst slavery, and was to be the eventual heir of his father’s estate. Allan was a man “of great sway among the

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<sup>19</sup> Finney, *Memoirs*, 378-380; Cochrane, *William C. Cochrane, Charles Grandison Finney Memorial Address, Delivered at the Dedication of the Finney Memorial Chapel, Oberlin, June 21, 1908* (Philadelphia, 1908), 86; William Warren Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America* (Grand Rapids, 1973), 296; Lesick, *The Lane Rebels*, 72.

<sup>20</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Charles Grandison Finney, April 22, 1828, *Weld Letters*, I:14-18.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Grandison Finney, *Sermons on Important Subjects* (New York, 1836), 34, 94.

<sup>22</sup> Barnes, *The Anti-Slavery Impulse*, 67.

students” and Weld was relentless in his personal interactions with him. Over the course of several weeks, Allan struggled with his conscience, until finally “his soul broke loose from its shackles” and he renounced slaveholding as well as any and all gradualist schemes for its abolition. Allen would go on to be elected the president of the Lane Antislavery Society and one of Lane’s (and later Oberlin’s) most able and outspoken student-abolitionists. Because of this and his tremendous propaganda value, he would also be the first of the Rebels threatened with disciplinary action by the Lane trustees.<sup>23</sup>

Most poignant, however, was the testimony of James Bradley, a Lane seminarian who had been kidnapped from Africa into slavery some time before his fourth birthday. Here was a man who had no need for notes or references to antislavery propaganda to give his words force. Even when the memories of his former wretched life as a slave made him exclaim “oh, my soul!” and rendered him temporarily speechless, the heartbreak Bradley suffered as a bondsman showed clearly through to his Lane audiences.<sup>24</sup>

After being sold at the slave market in Charleston, South Carolina, he labored in that state for a time. Though he was owned by a man some described as “a wonderfully kind master,” Bradley gave testimony that proved even the “best” masters were still terrible masters. He was worked from sunup to sundown, and after he became sick from his exhaustion and lost all use of one of his ankles, his master dismissed him as no better (and no more valuable) than a “filthy opossum.” Moreover, Bradley recalled that his master “kept me ignorant of everything he could,” never telling him “anything about God, or [his] own soul,” and especially kept him

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<sup>23</sup> *Liberator*, April 5, 1834; Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, March 18, 1834, *Weld Letters*, I:132-135; Lyman, “Lane Seminary Rebels,” 63-65.

<sup>24</sup> James Bradley, “Brief Account of an Emancipated Slave,” in *The Oasis*, ed. Lydia Maria Child (Boston, 1834), 106-108; *New York Evangelist*, November 1, 1834; See also James H. Fairchild, *Oberlin: Its Origins, Progress, and Results* (Oberlin, 1860), 29.

from anything remotely resembling reading or writing.<sup>25</sup> Only after teaching himself to read and sleeping but three hours nightly so that he could earn enough money to “buy” himself did James Bradley escape his “dark and hopeless bondage.”<sup>26</sup>

It would have been hard for anyone hearing Bradley’s story to deny that slavery was not a heinous sin. The Lane logic of conversion away from that sin was classic perfectionist antislavery: immediate emancipation was necessary because it was every person’s duty to rid his or her life of sin. Since God was sovereign, moral agents were forced to realize that the breaking of His laws (in this case, slavery), was not only a sin against the victim (the slaves), but a sin against God Himself because he made those laws. Further, slavery restricted the ability of those enslaved to exercise the God-given freedom to choose whether or not to obey.<sup>27</sup> Weld echoed his mentor Finney when he declared “God has committed to every moral agent the privilege, the right and the responsibility of personal ownership. Slavery annihilated it, and surrenders to avarice, passion and lust, all that makes life a blessing. It crushes the body, tramples into the dust the upward tendencies of intellect, breaks the heart, and kills the soul.”<sup>28</sup>

The Rev. Asa Mahan, the lone supporter of the Rebels among the Lane trustees, defended his support of what opponents alleged was an unimportant “single principle” in perfectionist terms. “The cause of human nature,” he said, “in the person of the slave, was, not by our choice, but in the unavoidable providence of God, forced upon us, and we are necessitated to show our hands on the one side or the other.” Under the circumstances, he saw but one alternative: either “to violate my conscience

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<sup>25</sup> Bradley, “Brief Account of an Emancipated Slave,” 107-108; *New York Evangelist*, November 1, 1834.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> See Finney, *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 1-42; Lesick, *The Lane Rebels*, 84-85

<sup>28</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Arthur Tappan, Joshua Leavitt, and Elizur Wright, Jr., November 22, 1833, *Weld Letters*, I:120.

and the will of God, or to ‘dare to be true,’ ‘dare to be just,’ and ‘dare to do right,’ and leave consequences with ‘the Judge of all.’”<sup>29</sup> Because free men were capable of choosing the right path, God’s demand that they quit sinning could not be contested. This was the crux of the abolitionist argument at Lane, and would become the foundation of the American abolitionist movement that followed.

After the conclusion of the first nine-day long “annihilative onset upon slavery,” as Beecher termed it, there was a unanimous vote by the students in favor of immediate emancipation. Without delay, a second nine day long debate commenced on the colonization question. Again the Lane students agreed with James Bradley’s assessment that the scheme was patently outrageous and offensive. If slaves could take care of themselves *as slaves*, with the weight of supporting themselves and their masters on their shoulders, Bradley declared, “strange if they couldn’t do it when it tumbled off.”<sup>30</sup> Despite the fact that “even Liberty” was bitter to him while any man remained in bondage, the former slave articulated his refusal to submit to any emigration scheme and leave his “brethren under the yoke.”<sup>31</sup>

Thanks in no small part to the skill of Bradley, of whom at least one observer grouped with the most skilled African American abolitionists who could “not be equaled by the more logical and polished of our Birney and Weld,” the colonization debate ended with a similar vote as the first.<sup>32</sup> Only one person dared vote in favor of the ill-defined scheme. The lone dissenter was likely a son of the local agent for the American Colonization Society. Another vote was eagerly called for to form a student antislavery society. Among the officers and managers were Weld, Henry B. Stanton,

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<sup>29</sup> Asa Mahan, *Autobiography: Intellectual, Moral, and Spiritual* (London, 1882), 186-187.

<sup>30</sup> *New York Evangelist*, May 23, 1835.

<sup>31</sup> *The Anti-Slavery Record*, Vol.II, No.VI (June, 1836), 70; *New York Evangelist*, August 6, 1836.

<sup>32</sup> *New York Evangelist*, August 6, 1836.

and George Whipple of New York, James A. Thome of Kentucky, and James Bradley, listed as hailing from Guinea.<sup>33</sup>

The Lane Rebels also fervently believed that “faith without *works* is dead”—and the “works” were just as important as the faith that sustained them.<sup>34</sup> Even as the abolition debates were going on the Lane campus, student abolitionists were integrating themselves into the Cincinnati Black community, giving tangible testimony to their abolitionist declarations.<sup>35</sup> In the city where over 2,500 African Americans resided, Lane students went out of their way to help free Blacks advance in Cincinnati’s racist atmosphere. Weld wrote to Lewis Tappan, “We have formed a large and efficient organization for elevating the colored people in Cincinnati.” In the Lyceum they founded for Cincinnati’s African American residents, Lane students lectured three or four evenings a week on grammar, geography, arithmetic, natural philosophy, and other subjects. Since three fourths of the Cincinnati African American population were former slaves who had just recently become free, a nightly school was founded by Lane tutors to teach more basic skills like reading and writing. This was especially important because racial laws in Ohio barred African Americans from being educated in any school that was supported in any way by the tax dollars of white citizens.<sup>36</sup>

There were also three large Sabbath schools and Bible classes. Weld explained that “By sections in rotation, and teaching the evening reading-schools in the same

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<sup>33</sup> *New York Evangelist*, March 22, April 5, 1834; Beecher, *Autobiography*, 324; Lyman, “Lane Seminary Rebels,” 62; Johnson, *Garrison and his Times*, 169.

<sup>34</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, March 18, 1834, *Weld Letters*, I: 132-135; Abzug, *Passionate Liberator*, 94; Thomas, *Theodore Weld*, 72.

<sup>35</sup> They also busied themselves in the Underground Railroad by spiriting self-emancipating bondsmen between “stations.” Huntington Lyman wrote that his horse “might be taken without question by any brother who had on hand ‘Business of Egypt,’” a contemporary designation of the Underground Railroad. Lyman remembered that his horse “was hard used.” Lyman, “Lane Seminary Rebels,” 66-67; Thomas, *Theodore Weld*, 78.

<sup>36</sup> See James H. Rodabaugh, “The Negro in Ohio,” *Journal of Negro History*, Vol.3, No.1 (January, 1946), 12; See also George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York, 1971), 130-164.



way, we can perform an immense amount of labor among them without interruption to our studies.” Two of the Rebels were so taken with the desire to help Cincinnati’s Black population that they withdrew from Lane to start a full time school in the city. Weld’s zeal for the West was apparent here as well: “Cincinnati is the best locality in the Union to act upon slavery by a spectacle of free black cultivation.”<sup>37</sup>

But the racism of Cincinnati loomed large. Residents could easily recall the scenes of carnage from race riots just a few years earlier. Lane itself was dependent to a large degree on the financial support of slaveholding Southerners. News of the debates, not to mention the students’ extracurricular interracial social work, was not received sympathetically by the school’s patrons.<sup>38</sup> Asa Mahan was accused of promoting “the principle of amalgamation” and was “practically disfellowshipped and treated as an alien and outcast by the churches, and mass of the community.” An anti-abolitionist mob even attacked Mahan’s children in front of his Cincinnati house and attempted to stone them.<sup>39</sup>

The combination of Lane students interacting socially with Cincinnati’s African American population and their insistence on debating abolitionism on campus was more than most school officials could stomach. Beecher advised Weld that “you are taking just the course to defeat your own object, and prevent yourself from doing good.” Teaching at African American schools was one thing, but interacting with Black families socially was something altogether different. If Weld and his associates continued their social involvement in the African American community, Beecher warned that he would “be overwhelmed.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, March 18, 1834, *Weld Letters*, I:132-135; Beecher, *Autobiography*, 324-325.

<sup>38</sup> Beecher, *Autobiography*, 325, 327; Henry B. Stanton and James Mott to James A. Thome, September 11, 1834, RG 16/5/3, Autograph file, OCA.

<sup>39</sup> Mahan, *Autobiography*, 173.

<sup>40</sup> Beecher, *Autobiography*, 325, 327; Henry B. Stanton and James Mott to James A. Thome, September 11, 1834, RG 16/5/3, Autograph file, OCA; See also Mahan, *Autobiography*, 172-186.

Beecher was nominally sympathetic to the abolitionist students, if not their immediatism. Hoping that the storm would pass with time and cool reflection, he went east on college business. In New York City, he had occasion to meet with the Tappans and other antislavery men in an attempt to reconcile abolitionism and colonization. While in the metropolis, he also urged Lewis Tappan to help him get rid of the rabble-rouser Weld, who, he had come to realize, “could not be touched with a ten foot pole.”<sup>41</sup> Here as at Lane, his conservative entreaties were met with skepticism and disapproval. At the meeting’s close, the Rev. Samuel Cornish, a prominent African American journalist, offered a “most appropriate and fervent prayer” that alluded “with deep pathos” to the history of African American oppression in America. His prayer rebuked Beecher’s standpoint as representative of an “injurious” scheme that created hostility among Americans while praising the abolitionists who had been “raised up to plead and defend their cause” against such influence.<sup>42</sup>

Beecher parted company with his former benefactors a humbled man. As he returned to Lane, he was informed that the board of trustees (in his absence but with his tacit approval) had resolved that public meetings among students should not be held without official sanction, and that all antislavery societies in the school should be immediately abolished. Even antislavery discussion around college dining tables was prohibited. A committee of trustees and faculty were vested with the power of dismissal for violators.<sup>43</sup> One conservative faculty member demanded “some manifesto on the subject from the trustees” explaining whether Lane had truly become nothing more than “a concern intended to be the great Laboratory and depot for

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<sup>41</sup> Beecher, quoted in Abzug, *Passionate Liberator*, 118.

<sup>42</sup> Tappan, *Life of Arthur Tappan*, 230-231; See also *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Beecher, *Autobiography*, 325-332; Stanton, *Random Recollections*, 48; Lane Seminary Trustee Minutes, August 20, 1834, RG 30/24, Robert S. Fletcher papers (hereafter FP), Box 12, Folder 5, OCA; Tappan, *Life of Arthur Tappan*, 226-228.

everything [conceived?] and half-wrought, in New York & elsewhere, by *soi-dissant* abolitionists.”<sup>44</sup>

At this, nearly the entire student body requested their own dismissal, and the board granted it.<sup>45</sup> Stanton wrote to fellow Rebel James Armstrong Thome that the abolitionists would rather have “not only their names but their bodies, cast out as evil, before they will hazard for one moment the cause of the oppressed, or yield an inch to the assault of a corrupt & persecuting public sentiment, or swerve one hair from the great principles which have been the basis of all our operations in regard to Slavery & Colonization. No never—never!”<sup>46</sup> The explicit comparisons the Rebels made regarding the trustees were even more condemnatory. Huntington Lyman catalogued the Lane officials among some of history’s most notorious reactionaries including “The great Herod” and “Torquemada and his compeers in the Holy Office of the Inquisition.”<sup>47</sup>

Most of the Rebels remained near Cincinnati to continue their work among its African American population. Arthur Tappan sent them a gift of one thousand dollars for their temporary support. When a building in nearby Cumminsville was made available to them, they considered the organization of another seminary, this one built firmly upon abolitionist principles.<sup>48</sup> Asa Mahan continued to give them his support and wisdom. John Morgan, their former professor at Lane, joined him in continuing

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<sup>44</sup> Robert S. Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College, From its Foundation Through the Civil War* (Oberlin, 1943), 158.

<sup>45</sup> Beecher, *Autobiography*, 325-332; Stanton, *Random Recollections*, 48; Mahan *Autobiography*, 184; Lyman, “Lane Seminary Rebels,” 64-66; Tappan, *Life of Arthur Tappan*, 231.

<sup>46</sup> Henry B. Stanton to James A. Thome, September 11, 1834, RG 16/5/3, Autograph File, OCA.

<sup>47</sup> Lyman, “Lane Seminary Rebels,” 65-66.

<sup>48</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to James G. Birney, October 20, 1834, in *The Letters of James Gillespie Birney 1831-1857*, Vol.I, ed. Dwight L. DuMond (New York, 1938), 146; Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, January 1, 1870, in Tappan, *Life of Arthur Tappan*, 236; Henry B. Stanton and George Whipple to Charles Grandison Finney, January 10, 1835, Charles Grandison Finney papers, Microfilm, OCA; Lyman, “Lane Seminary Rebels,” 66-67; Tappan, *Life of Arthur Tappan*, 236-237; Cochrane, *Memorial Address*, 85; Francis P. Weisenberger, *The History of the State of Ohio: Volume III, The Passing of the Frontier* (Columbus, 1941), 369.

as best they could the students' education. After they all learned of John J. Shipherd's plans for them at the Oberlin Institute, they enthusiastically sought to help bring them to fruition.

The Monday morning after Shipherd first arrived at Mahan's house, the two men jumped upon the first steamer that was heading up the Ohio River in search of Weld, who had set out on a series of antislavery lectures after cutting his ties with Lane. Shipherd and Mahan stopped over in Ripley to pay a visit to the Rev. John Rankin, one of the most prolific conductors of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley.<sup>49</sup> There, Rankin informed them of Weld's whereabouts and loaned them a pair of horses by which to reach Hillsboro, the town in the country where Weld was then speaking. Upon locating their man, they discussed their plans, and Mahan and Shipherd relayed to Weld that he was the choice of the Cumminsville students to fill the professorship of theology. However, Weld demurred, and argued that there was but one man worthy of filling such an important role—their mutual friend and mentor, Charles Grandison Finney.<sup>50</sup>

Before Shipherd started East with Mahan to sound out Finney, he posted an important letter to the trustees back in Oberlin, already making arrangements for the accession. Mahan, Morgan, and the students demanded that freedom of speech on all reform issues be granted as a condition of their moving to Oberlin. Most importantly, they required that African Americans be admitted to Oberlin together with and on the same terms as white students. To satisfy the Rebels, Shipherd instructed trustee Nathan P. Fletcher to introduce a resolution at the next trustees' meeting that students

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<sup>49</sup> See Samuel J. May, *Some Recollections of Our Antislavery Conflict* (Boston, 1869), 10-11; Ann Hagedorn, *Beyond the River: The Untold Story of the Heroes of the Underground Railroad* (New York, 2004), 25-35; Keith P. Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington, 2004), 61-64.

<sup>50</sup> Mahan, *Autobiography*, 192-193; Huntington Lyman and Henry B. Stanton to Theodore Dwight Weld, January 22, 1835, *Weld Letters*, I:201-203; Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney*, 160.

be received at the Institute “*irrespective of color.*” Only by doing so, he wrote, would they gain God’s favor, the services of two first rate intellectuals, as well as the confidence of “benevolent & able men.”<sup>51</sup>

Shipherd wholeheartedly agreed with the Lane Rebels’ demands. He added that “if our Board would violate right so as to reject youth of talent and piety because they were *black*, I should have *no heart* to labor for the upholding of our Seminary.” He believed that if Oberlin fell short in this way, the curse of God would come upon them just as it had upon Lane, “for its unchristian abuse of the poor slave.”<sup>52</sup> Even Lane had admitted African Americans into its ranks, including the former slave James Bradley, who was also ready to enroll in the Oberlin Institute if they would have him.

### ***RACE AND ABOLITIONISM IN EARLY OHIO***

Still, despite the Oberlin community’s professed idealism, its initial reaction proved that it had a ways to go before it would catch up with that of its founder. Upon the receipt of Shipherd’s news, the community fell into a frenzied panic. Notwithstanding the practice of Lane and other schools to admit African American students, many Oberlinites seemed convinced of its novelty. Others feared that the town and school were to be “overwhelmed with colored students, and the mischiefs that would follow were frightful in the extreme.”<sup>53</sup> Some young ladies declared that if African American students were admitted of equal privileges, they would return to their homes, “if they had to ‘wade Lake Erie’ to accomplish it.”<sup>54</sup> Philo Stewart publicly pronounced Shipherd “mad.”<sup>55</sup> On December 31, 1834, a group of students

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<sup>51</sup> John J. Shipherd to Nathan P. Fletcher, December 15, 1834, in James H. Fairchild, *Oberlin: The Colony and the College, 1833-1883* (Oberlin, 1883), 55.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 56.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Nathan P. Fletcher, “Critical Letters #3,” RG 7/1/3, Office of the Treasurer, Box 4, OCA.

circulated a petition among themselves to ascertain their position on the issue of “admitting persons of color, to this Institution, under existing circumstances.” The final tally stood thirty two “Against,” twenty six “In favour.” Only six female students voted in the affirmative, though the young men polled favored the proposition by three votes.<sup>56</sup>

The trustees assumed the issue to be so divisive in Oberlin that they decided to hold their next meeting in nearby Elyria to avoid as much controversy as possible. Despite a petition by some colonists and students urging them to meet where their deliberations could be observed, the board met as planned and produced a non-committal resolution in response to Shipherd’s letter. They did not yet feel prepared to give a binding pledge until they received “more definite” information on the subject. They did, however, approve the appointment of John Morgan and Asa Mahan despite avoiding the platform upon which both men stood.<sup>57</sup>

The decision of the trustees had proven them only nominally more progressive on racial issues than the rest of Ohio. As 1834 turned to 1835, Oberlin, the Western Reserve, and Ohio were far from being committed to antislavery and much further from any true sense of racial egalitarianism. Even in the state’s Constitutional Convention of 1802, a proposition to establish legalized slavery in the state despite the section of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 (which prohibited it in the Territory) came within a single vote of earning the approval of a preliminary committee.<sup>58</sup> Thus the

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<sup>56</sup> “We, Students of O.C. Institute...,” December 31, 1834, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 8, OCA. Fairchild recalled that there were three or four young men among the students who advocated immediate emancipation, but that the majority of students and colonists were colonizationists, as evidenced by the discussions on the topic in the Oberlin lyceums, attended by both students and colonists. James H. Fairchild, “A Sketch of the Anti-Slavery History of Oberlin: An Address Before the Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society of Oberlin, May 13, 1856,” RG 2/3, James H. Fairchild papers, Box 9, OCA.

<sup>57</sup> Oberlin Trustee Minutes, January 1, 1835, RG 30/24, FP, Box 15, Folder 7, OCA.

<sup>58</sup> William Jay, *Miscellaneous Writings on Slavery* (Boston, 1853), 376-377; Weisenberger, *The Passing of the Frontier*, 41; Rodabaugh, “The Negro in Ohio,” 16; Frank U. Quillin, *The Color Line in Ohio: A History of Race Prejudice in a Typical Northern States* (Ann Arbor, 1913), 13-17, 22-23.

first state carved from the Northwest Territory nearly set a precedent that established slavery on soil that the national government had declared forever free. Nonetheless, the whole convention eventually developed a constitution that retained the Ordinance's ban on slavery and involuntary servitude. Even though this was a significant defeat for slavery in the expanding United States, in itself it held volatile ingredients for conflict.<sup>59</sup>

The antislavery clauses of the Northwest Ordinance and the Ohio constitution drew three distinct groups of people to the area. First, there were those of whom a significant number were already hostile to slavery such as the Quakers and many New Englanders who brought a degree of sympathy for African Americans and hints of racial egalitarianism. However, the same ban on slavery attracted substantially more men and women who, though potentially opposed to the institution of slavery, were equally or more so opposed to the presence of free African Americans in their midst. Finally, African Americans themselves were drawn toward the Ohio country to the promise of relative freedom. Free Southern and Northern African Americans, manumitted slaves, and even self-emancipating bondsmen from the South saw a vision of hope in Ohio.<sup>60</sup>

As the majority, those lawmakers who opposed slavery for racist reasons set the policy tone in Ohio after 1802. Though the official attitude in the state was nominally antislavery, it also led lawmakers to do everything in their power to keep free African Americans out as well. The first state constitution recognized the rights of white men only, and the first of the state's infamous "Black Laws" were passed by the legislature in 1804 and 1807. These required two white sponsors and a prohibitive

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<sup>59</sup> See Barbara A. Terzian, "Ohio's Constitutional Conventions and Constitutions," in *The History of Ohio Law*, Vol.I, ed. Michael Les Benedict and John F. Winkler (Athens, 2004), 42-48.

<sup>60</sup> James H. Rodabaugh, "The Negro in Ohio," 12; See also George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York, 1971), 130-164.

bond of five hundred dollars for African Americans to enter the state, barred them from militia service, and denied them the right to testify against whites in court or to vote. Legislation in the 1820s also barred African Americans from attending public schools created for whites or paid for by taxes collected from white citizens.<sup>61</sup> Those African Americans who did settle in Ohio's borders were to be made as uncomfortable as possible and to acutely feel their supposed degradation. As Black activist John Malvin remembered of Ohio in the 1820s, he was not only "personally despised," but not even under the protection of the laws themselves. "I found every door closed against the colored man," he noted, "excepting the jails and penitentiaries."<sup>62</sup>

Still, the five hundred dollar bond statute was not always enforced, and despite the state having some of the most offensive racial laws in the free states, many African Americans moved with their families to Ohio.<sup>63</sup> To them, living under restrictions in a free state was preferable to living in a slave state. One historian estimates that in the town of Oberlin, nearly two thirds of the antebellum African American population were born in the slave states of Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky. A sizeable number of the other third hailed from Tennessee, Washington, D.C., South Carolina, Maryland, Alabama, and Mississippi.<sup>64</sup> Further south in Cincinnati, over one three year period in the late 1820s, the African American population ballooned from just 690 to nearly 2,300, most of whom came from slave states.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> The same law and another in 1831 exempted African Americans from paying taxes for common schools, in effect prohibiting them from being educated in any schools not totally organized, taught, and financed by themselves. See John Malvin, *The Autobiography of John Malvin: A Narrative* (Cleveland, 1879), 11-12; Paul Finkelman, "Race, Slavery, and Law in Antebellum Ohio," in *The History of Ohio Law*, 760-761; Andrew Robert Lee Cayton, *Ohio: The History of a People* (Columbus, 2002), 58-61.

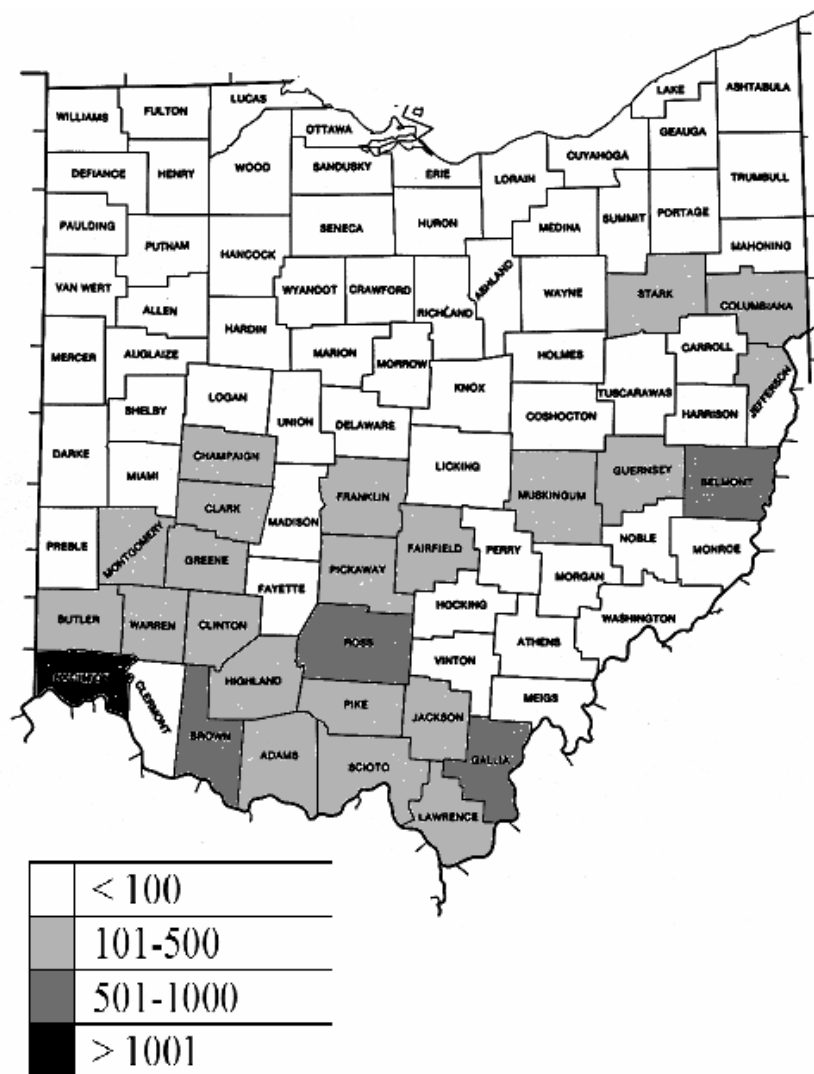
<sup>62</sup> Malvin, *Autobiography*, 12; William Jay, *Miscellaneous Writings on Slavery* (Boston, 1853), 376-377; Weisenberger, *The Passing of the Frontier*, 41; Rodabaugh, "The Negro in Ohio," 16; Quillin, *The Color Line in Ohio*, 13-17, 22-23.

<sup>63</sup> Jay, *Miscellaneous Writings on Slavery*, 376-377; Quillin, *The Color Line in Ohio*, 31.

<sup>64</sup> William E. Bigglestone, *They Stopped in Oberlin: Black Residents and Visitors of the Nineteenth Century* (Oberlin, 1981), xv.

<sup>65</sup> Weisenberger, *Passing of the Frontier*, 42.





**Figure 2.1: African American population of Ohio, 1830**  
(map by author, data from Quillin, *The Color Line in Ohio* (1913))

Alarmed whites retrenched. When Quakers in North Carolina voiced their intent to free their slaves in the mid 1820s, the Cincinnati *Gazette* approved of their antislavery actions but wholly rejected the wisdom of sending them to settle in Ohio. The writer believed that “the propriety or expediency of their sending those persons to infest the towns of Ohio or Indiana” was completely lacking.<sup>66</sup> Predictably, white

<sup>66</sup> Eugene Holloway Roseboom, Francis Phelps Weisenburger, *A History of Ohio* (New York, 1934), 210; Weisenburger, *Passing of the Frontier*, 42.

reaction to the African American influx into Ohio was often swift and severe. In 1829, Cincinnati officials gave local African Americans sixty days to comply with the security bond required of them by the Black Laws or to leave the city. Few did, and when authorities hesitated, mobs of angry white men ruled the city for three days and nights, laying many unfortunate African Americans low in the process. Some white citizens demanded that the city earmark funds to remove African Americans to Canada. Though the Ohio legislature decided not to allocate the money, as many as two thousand African Americans left the area for Canada with the help of private donations. In January of 1830 in another town, Portsmouth, Ohio, the entire African American population, about eighty in number, was forcibly driven out of the community.<sup>67</sup>

In Ohio, colonization was a wildly popular cause. The “negro problem” struck many as so grave that a special legislative committee was appointed in 1827 to investigate its causes and potential solutions. Prefacing his remarks by declaring Ohio’s African Americans “a serious political and moral evil,” its chairman spoke for “the white laboring classes of the state” when he expressed his hope that the “excrescence on the body politic” would be not just prevented from entering the state, but removed altogether through colonizationist efforts.<sup>68</sup>

By the time the committee’s report was made public, there were numerous branches of the A.C.S. across Ohio, including four in the Western Reserve, where the African American population was still relatively miniscule.<sup>69</sup> In 1834, Ohio Governor

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<sup>67</sup> Jay, *Miscellaneous Writings on Slavery*, 376-377; Quillin, *The Color Line in Ohio*, 31-32; Weisenberger, *Passing of the Frontier*, 42; William Cheek and Aimee Lee Cheek, *John Mercer Langston and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1829-65* (Urbana, 1989), 81; Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing*, 34-35; Nikki Marie Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati’s Black Community, 1802-1868* (Columbus, 2005), 50-79; Knepper, *Ohio and its People*, 197.

<sup>68</sup> Quillin, *The Color Line in Ohio*, 55-56.

<sup>69</sup> As late as 1850, the African American population of the entire Western Reserve numbered but 1,331, far less than many single counties in the South. See Weisenberger, *Passing of the Frontier*, 365-366.

Robert Lucas was selected as the state society's president, and even ladies' and youth auxiliaries were operating in various parts of the state.<sup>70</sup> Although the first antislavery newspapers in America had been founded in Ohio in the 1810s and 1820s, the influence of the colonizationists far outweighed them prior to the 1830s.<sup>71</sup>

Conservative leaders in the Western Reserve won a striking victory over budding abolitionist agitation in the fall of 1832 when they accomplished the removal of three radical faculty members of Western Reserve College in Hudson. After having led heated discussion on immediatism and Garrison's influential pamphlet *Thoughts on African Colonization*, professors Beriah Green, Elizur Wright, Jr., and President Charles B. Storrs resigned their posts under pressure. A local paper celebrated the removal of "the malign influence" of the abolitionists in its ranks and looked forward to the school's potential "usefulness" now that it would not be bothered by "the negro question."<sup>72</sup>

However, the seed of abolitionism, which had been planted decades earlier, continued to germinate. As conservatives retrenched, Ohio abolitionists consolidated their forces. In September of 1833, immediately following commencement at Western Reserve College, area antislavery men gathered to form the Western Reserve Anti-Slavery and Colonization Society. After three hours of strenuous debate over the society's goals, the colonizationists withdrew. The remainder of the delegates drafted a constitution based upon the principle of "total and immediate emancipation," struck

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<sup>70</sup> Weisenberger, *Passing of the Frontier*, 366.

<sup>71</sup> These included Charles Osbourne's *The Philanthropist* (Mt. Pleasant, 1817), Elisha Bates' continuation of *The Philanthropist* (Mt. Pleasant, 1818), and Benjamin Lundy's *Genius of Universal Emancipation* (Mt. Pleasant, 1821). See Anetta C. Walsh, "Three Anti-Slavery Newspapers Published in Ohio Prior to 1823," *The Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XXXI (1922), 172-212; C.B. Galbreath, "Anti-Slavery Movement in Columbiana County," *The Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XXX (1921), 356-357.

<sup>72</sup> Carroll Cutler, *A History of Western Reserve College During its First Half Century, 1826-1876* (Cleveland, 1876), 24-31; Johnson, *William Lloyd Garrison and his Times*, 141-144; Elizur Wright, Jr. to Theodore Dwight Weld, February 1, 1833, *Weld Letters*, I:101-105; Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College*, 144-145.

“colonization” from its name, and elected its officers, including Elizur Wright, Sr., Austinburg’s Henry Cowles, and Hudson’s Owen Brown. Cowles was a minister who would be appointed professor of languages at the Oberlin Institute in 1835. Brown, father of the then-unknown John Brown, was a former Western Reserve College trustee who had resigned after the faculty antislavery controversy. He would serve as Oberlin Institute trustee from 1835-1844.<sup>73</sup> In August 1833, the annual meeting of the Society added another staunch immediatist, John J. Shipherd to its list of “counselors.”<sup>74</sup> On February 26, 1835, the Lorain County Anti-Slavery Society was organized. Among its officers were Levi Burrell, a Finney convert from Rochester currently living in Elyria, who served as the Society’s corresponding secretary (the same position he would soon fill at the Oberlin Institute), and current Oberlin Institute trustee Nathan P. Fletcher.<sup>75</sup>

#### ***“AN INSTITUTION WHERE ABOLITIONISM IS CONCENTRATED”***

The division among the Oberlin trustees was simply reflective of a schism that was exposing itself in Ohio and the greater Northwest. As the West developed the American identity anew, the question of whether there would be a place for African Americans remained open. Shipherd’s ambitious plan for American regeneration was inclusive. Indeed, the Oberlin Institute had not *excluded* anyone from its fellowship after its founding until its board of trustees first declared African American admissions inexpedient in response to Shipherd’s request. The glaring sins standing in the way of America and the millennium were slavery and racism, and it would fall to Shipherd once again to make a Herculean effort to clear the way. He had gathered the forces he

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<sup>73</sup> *Liberator*, September 21, 1833.

<sup>74</sup> Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 146.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*

hoped would bring down sin and slavery in one fell swoop, and he would have the commission for their deployment or exhaust himself in the attempt.

Shipherd did not immediately receive news of the failure of the board to pass his resolution. It was not in his makeup, however, to hesitate. He hired Mahan as Oberlin's president without first consulting the trustees, unilaterally guaranteed all the Lane Rebels' demands, hired Morgan as professor, and went to New York to obtain the blessing and wealth of some of the nation's wealthiest merchants and the services of America's most famous and celebrated preacher, Charles Grandison Finney, without first receiving any reply to his request that the Oberlin Institute admit African American students.

When Shipherd finally did receive word of the failure of his resolution, it was through but one of a flurry of letters circulating among the interested parties. Shipherd described to his brother the plans of he and Mahan, whom he referred to as the "Assistant Agent for our dear Institute." He was sure that in addition to the new president, Morgan and most of the Lane Rebels would soon be calling Oberlin their new home and the Tappans their enduring benefactors. He was also certain that these men would use their influence to raise even more support for Oberlin in New York. Already brimming with confidence that Finney would join them all in Ohio, it seemed to Shipherd as if God had put his hand upon "a golden chain which [he would] be able to link to Oberlin & thro' it bind many souls in holy allegiance to our Blessed King."<sup>76</sup>

William T. Allan, the Lane Rebel and reformed Alabama slaveholder wrote to Theodore Dwight Weld that if he and Finney went to Oberlin, he would commit to go as well. Never one for understatement, Allan estimated the effect his enrollment at Oberlin would have on his family and Southern acquaintances. "That, with me," he

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<sup>76</sup> John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, December 22, 1834, RG 30/24, FP, Box 9, Folder 3, OCA; John J. Shipherd to Nathan P. Fletcher, December 15, 1834, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 2, OCA.

predicted, “will be putting on the capstone—I shall have passed the rubicon if I should go to an institution where abolition is concentrated—at the head of which is that arch-heretic Finney.”<sup>77</sup> James A. Thome, a Lane Rebel from a Kentucky slaveholding family, shared his belief that “the Lord has been gracious to me in throwing me into such circumstances.” He was eager to continue his studies and begin lecturing on behalf of the slave, and welcomed any adversity that he may encounter towards that end. “I don’t care about beginning my work with ever so great opposition,” he wrote, “if that opposition is incurred by doing duty. I will surely not meet with more than our Saviour faced.”<sup>78</sup>

In mid-January, 1835, all interested parties converged on New York City to determine the fate of the Oberlin Institute and the exiled Lane students. The Rebels set the tone for the negotiations which were to follow in a direct appeal to Finney. Henry B. Stanton and George Whipple, writing on the unanimous behalf of their classmates, shared their deep valuation of “the cause of theological education in the West.” It appeared to them that “the impenitent West is rushing to death, unresisted & almost unwarned.” The only preventative, in their opinion, was a strong revival presence, maintained by “a new race of ministers” trained and sent out by the ablest revivalist America had seen: Finney. “Our eyes have for a long time been turned toward you,” they told him, and they could not avoid the conviction that God himself was calling him to the professorship of theology at the Oberlin Institute.<sup>79</sup>

When Shipherd and Mahan arrived in the city, they arranged a meeting with Finney and some of his closest New York associates to hear their plans.<sup>80</sup> Arthur and Lewis Tappan had previously suggested to the indecisive Finney that he relocate to

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<sup>77</sup> William T. Allan to Theodore Dwight Weld, January 8, 1835, *Weld Letters*, I:189-190.

<sup>78</sup> James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, January 8, 1835, *Weld Letters*, I:190-191.

<sup>79</sup> Henry B. Stanton and George Whipple to Charles Grandison Finney, January 10, 1835, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 3, OCA.

<sup>80</sup> Mahan, *Autobiography*, 193.

Cumminsville in the immediate wake of the Lane debates.<sup>81</sup> This time, the Tappans' entreaties that Finney go to Oberlin were seconded by those of Shipherd, Mahan, and the students themselves. Shipherd laid out his plans for Oberlin and the West, and Mahan relayed the demands and conditions of the Lane contingent. Arthur Tappan pledged ten thousand dollars to the Oberlin venture; Lewis Tappan, Isaac Dimond, William Green and other New York philanthropists agreed to fund the salaries of eight professors. These pledges all came with two conditions, however: the Lane Rebels' demands must be met, and Finney must go to Oberlin as its professor of theology.<sup>82</sup>

When the meeting adjourned, Finney agreed to take the matter "into serious consideration." He peppered Mahan with a series of questions about the preparations being made at Oberlin, its endowment, and various other topics. When Mahan replied that they were doing nothing out of the ordinary, and would continue to do nothing until Finney made up his mind regarding his appointment, he firmed his resolve. Finney agreed to accept the Oberlin call, and reiterated his insistence on the list of conditions that he shared with the Rebels.<sup>83</sup> He wrote the same to the anxious former Lane students.<sup>84</sup>

However, the agreements struck in New York City would amount to nothing unless Oberlin proved to its potential benefactors that it was, in fact, more worthy of their support than Lane Seminary had been. Oberlin needed to be right on the question of the admission of students "irregardless of color." The former Lane students themselves were first and most vocal in their insistence that Oberlin live up to

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<sup>81</sup> Charles Grandison Finney to Elizabeth Finney, November 10, 1834, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 3, OCA.

<sup>82</sup> Mahan, *Autobiography*, 193; John J. Shipherd, pastoral letter, January 27, 1835, in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, "Appendix," 337-346; Arthur Tappan to John J. Shipherd, May 5, 1835, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 8, OCA (also in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, "Appendix," 355-356); Arthur Tappan to John J. Shipherd, July 23, 1835, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 2, OCA; John J. Shipherd to the Trustees of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute, January 19, 1835, RG 30/24, FP, Box 15, Folder 6, OCA.

<sup>83</sup> Mahan, *Autobiography*, 194.

<sup>84</sup> Charles Grandison Finney to Henry B. Stanton and George Whipple, January 10, 18, 1835, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 2, OCA.

its Christian charter and potential by establishing a color blind admissions policy. If the Rebels did not matriculate, there would be no need for their support. It was an essential point with potentially ruinous consequences if Oberlin did not comply. The school and community were seamlessly intertwined, and the fate of a bankrupt and rudderless Oberlin College could also mean the dissolution of the Oberlin community and the end of their utopian experiment almost before it got off the ground.

To be sure, Oberlin's expressed commitment to Christian brotherhood suggests that there was much more to their initial hesitancy to admit African American students than simple racial intolerance. The early years of the 1830s were also a period of extreme repression of institutions that taught African American students. In 1833, Quaker school teacher Prudence Crandall admitted a Black student to her Connecticut academy for girls, then attempted to recruit students into a new all Black school.<sup>85</sup> Townspeople responded by placing her school under an economic boycott, fouling Crandall's well with animal excrement, lobbying for a state law (under which she was later jailed) that declared anyone caught operating such a school a criminal, and burning her schoolhouse to the ground.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, in Canaan, New Hampshire, townspeople hitched ninety yoke of oxen to the Noyes Academy, an interracial school then attended by young Henry Highland Garnet and Alexander Crummell, and dragged it into a swamp nearly a half mile from where it originally stood. As the Black students fled town in the aftermath, their wagon was fired upon by a cannon procured by the mob.<sup>87</sup>

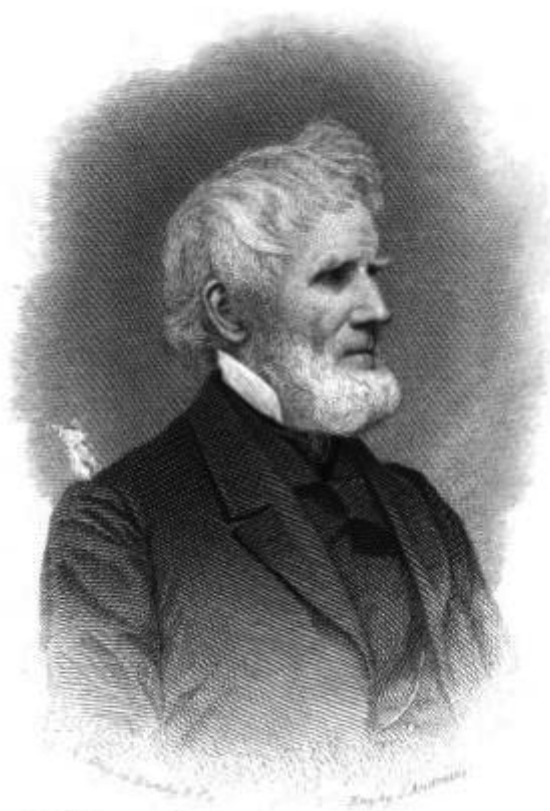
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<sup>85</sup> See *Liberator*, March 2, 16, April 27, May 18, 25, June 8, 15, 22, July 6, 20, 1833.

<sup>86</sup> *Report of the Arguments of Counsel, in the Case of Prudence Crandall, Plff. In Error, vs. State of Connecticut, Before the Supreme Court of Errors, at their Session in Brooklyn, July Term, 1834* (Boston, 1834), 3-4; Mrs. Henry Fawcett, *Some Immanent Women of Our Times: Short Biographical Sketches* (London, 1889), 223-231. On the Crandall drama, see *Report of the Arguments of Counsel*, 5-34; Susan Strane, *A Whole Souled Woman: Prudence Crandall and the Education of Black Women* (New York, 1990); Elizabeth Yates and Nora Spicer Unwin, *Prudence Crandall: Woman of Courage* (New York, 1955).

<sup>87</sup> William Allen Wallace, *The History of Canaan, New Hampshire*, ed. James Burns Wallace (Concord, NH, 1910), 255-296; James Oliver Horton, Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community,*





**Illustration 2.2: Arthur Tappan**  
(from Tappan, *Life of Arthur Tappan* (1872))

Even though Finney himself later feared that Oberlin's enemies would converge on the town and tear down the school, he admitted that Shipherd's resolution did not ask an unreasonable concession on the part of the trustees that might necessarily expose it to the dangers that destroyed other schools that admitted Black students.<sup>88</sup> In a letter to some of the Lane Rebels, he seconded the admonition of Arthur Tappan that while they did not necessarily wish the Oberlin Institute "to hold out an Abolition or Anti-abolition flag," the subject should be "let...alone for the faculty to manage."<sup>89</sup> Finney criticized the Oberlin community for not having

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and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860 (New York, 1997), 215; Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861* (Charleston, 2008), 231; Wilson J. Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (New York, 1988), 63-64.

<sup>88</sup> Finney, *Memoirs*, 387.

<sup>89</sup> Charles Grandison Finney to Henry B. Stanton and George Whipple, January 18, 1835, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 3, OCA; Charles Grandison Finney to Lewis Tappan, n.d., in Tappan, *Life of Arthur Tappan*, 239.

“wholly renounced the hateful prejudice against the people of color that had so generally prevailed in the country and in the churches.”<sup>90</sup>

John Morgan also took a turn critiquing the Oberlin Institute trustees. To Finney he wrote “I do not see how consistent abolitionists can give either money or their personal labors & influence to Oberlin till the trustees are ‘prepared’ to rescind this enactment & do justice to their colored brethren whether other institutions do so or not.” Without a doubt, what also made Oberlin’s short-sightedness so patently absurd to Morgan and others was the fact that even Lane itself had admitted African American students for years, and Western Reserve College, less than fifty miles distant, had passed a resolution in 1832 opening its doors to African American students.<sup>91</sup> The Lane contingent also bristled, declaring that the board’s reticence was “not enough in these times,” and that Mahan and Morgan should refuse their appointments unless the trustees changed their course.<sup>92</sup> Mahan himself wondered what it would take for the trustees “to quit themselves like men...and give the public manifestation of the fact.”<sup>93</sup>

It was clear to Shipherd that the entire enterprise depended on the resolution of the single question of race-blind admission. The institution was certainly no better off financially than it had been when he left, and the ideological support for its continued

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<sup>90</sup> Charles Grandison Finney to Lewis Tappan, n.d., in Tappan, *Life of Arthur Tappan*, 240-241.

<sup>91</sup> John Morgan to Charles Grandison Finney, January 13, 1835, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 3, OCA; John J. Shipherd, pastoral letter, January 27, 1835, in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, “Appendix,” 337-346; Clayton Sumner Elsworth, “Oberlin and the Anti-Slavery Movement up to the Civil War,” PhD dissertation, Cornell University (1930), 14n24. In 1807, Dartmouth had admitted an African American student, and at Amherst and Bowdoin in 1826, Edward Jones and John B. Russwurm had become the first African American college graduates. See John King Lord, *History of Dartmouth College*, Vol.2 (Concord, NH, 1913), 208; Nehemiah Cleveland, *History of Bowdoin College, With Biographical Sketches of its Graduates* (Boston, 1882), 352-353; Edward Hitchcock, *Reminiscences of Amherst College, Historical, Scientific, Biographical, and Autobiographical: Also, Of Other Wider Life Experiences* (Northampton, MA, 1863), 194, 330-331.

<sup>92</sup> George Whipple to Theodore Dwight Weld, January 8, 1835, *Weld Letters*, I:193-194.

<sup>93</sup> Elsworth, “Oberlin and the Anti-Slavery Movement,” 23.

existence seemed to be crumbling before his eyes. Oberlin had been brought together as a gathered community, supposedly of like mind with regards to their mission and egalitarian evangelicalism. Now, a majority of the institute's trustees had exposed their individual shortcomings on a principle that a significant minority felt was absolutely essential to the continuance of the Oberlin experiment.

From New York, Shipherd wrote what are perhaps the two most important letters in Oberlin's early history as a last-ditch effort to salvage his utopian dream. His disappointment was tempered by his ultimate faith in the community he had gathered, and the love he felt for them all was evident in his words. He wrote similar notes to the Oberlin church, of which he was the pastor, and the board of trustees in which he desperately appealed to their shared sense of mission and urged them to remain faithful to the promises which they had made when they took up the cause of Oberlin.

Shipherd urged his colonists to continue to seek the Lord's favor, something they could only do by altering their earlier decisions regarding Black students. He urged them to recall their pledges to live their lives for God unencumbered by worldly influences, best encapsulated in their colonial covenant. "Now, therefore," he said, "perform the doing of it." He meant to disabuse them of any notions they may have had about the insignificance of their decision, and reminded them that the choice at hand was vital to "peace, your usefulness, and the glory of God our Heavenly Father." If they would do their duty, Shipherd predicted that Oberlin would be "a living fountain whose waters will refresh the far-off, thirsty, dying Gentiles and wretched Jews."<sup>94</sup>

He pleaded with his Oberlin flock, "as the Lord's peculiar people," to be zealous in pursuing those means by which the world would be converted and to banish

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<sup>94</sup> John J. Shipherd, pastoral letter, January 27, 1835, in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, "Appendix," 337-346.

their fear “to lead in doing right.” Oberlin, he reminded them, had been founded to overturn artificial worldly distinctions among God’s people, and though he would never have them be “rash or inconsiderate in changing a single custom,” the equal inclusion of people of all races within their fold was something they must do “without asking how the world or even the Church would like it.” Truly, to Shipherd, nothing seemed “more impolitic as well as wicked than to substitute expediency for duty,” and he expressed to his people his fear that “some of you, beloved, if not all, will yield to its paralyzing influence.”<sup>95</sup>

To be sure, Oberlin had been founded two years earlier without any reference to racial issues or American slavery. Shipherd frankly admitted that fact while also regretting his decision to leave such significant details unstated at the time. Although he realized that some of his colonists were not necessarily in favor of the idea of immediate emancipation, he supposed that they at least thought it expedient and their duty to see to the elevation and education of African Americans as quickly as possible. Accordingly, he never imagined that any of them would stand in the way of including them in the Oberlin educational venture. However, the community had proven him wrong, and Shipherd proceeded to school them with a comprehensive list of twenty points at which the admission and education of African American students coincided with their pledges to each other and God at the community’s founding.<sup>96</sup> In a sense, Shipherd was presenting them with the first exegesis of their colonial charter.

As a practical matter, African American students were needed to spread God’s gospel, especially to Africa, “the land of their fathers,” and for “their untaught, injured, perishing brethren” in their own country. “Their education,” he surmised,

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<sup>95</sup> John J. Shipherd, pastoral letter, January 27, 1835, in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, “Appendix,” 337-346..

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*; See also James H. Fairchild, “A Sketch of the Anti-Slavery History of Oberlin: An Address Before the Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society of Oberlin, May 13, 1856,” RG 2/3, James H. Fairchild papers, Box 9, OCA.

seemed “highly essential if not indispensable to the emancipation and salvation of their colored brethren,” and it should not be limited to racially-segregated institutions. If they were to remain faithful to their ideals, Oberlin had to recognize of all men that God made them of one blood, and that, as their Christian neighbors, “whatsoever we would they should do unto us, we must do unto them, or become guilty before God.” He urged them to imagine themselves in the shoes of their oppressed brethren. What then, he asked, would “be your due as a neighbor?”<sup>97</sup>

On an even more basic level, Shipherd reminded the Oberlin community that their very survival depended on their changed hearts. Basically, the men and money Oberlin Institute needed for its continued existence could vanish if they rejected African American students.<sup>98</sup> Without the school, Shipherd’s entire mission would be fatally harmed. Eight paid professorships, ten thousand dollars, and the services of Finney, Mahan, and Morgan could not be had upon compromised principles. He wrote that these men of “anti-slavery sentiments” were just the men Oberlin needed, and worried that if the trustees “suffer[ed] expediency or prejudice to pervert justice” in this case, they would in others as well.<sup>99</sup> All other potential donors, Shipherd wrote Finney, seemed to have been turned off by “their fear of Abolitionism [which] unstrung their *benevolent* nerves.”<sup>100</sup>

Shipherd closed his appeal by informing his readers that he could no longer labor on Oberlin’s behalf if “our brethren in Jesus Christ must be rejected because they differ from us in color.” Though he had sustained Oberlin with his sweat, tears, and ceaseless labors, if Black students (and consequently Finney, Mahan and Morgan) were rejected, so too would he consider himself. But if they did come right on the

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<sup>97</sup> John J. Shipherd, pastoral letter, January 27, 1835, in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, “Appendix,” 337-346.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> John J. Shipherd to Charles Grandison Finney, February 10, 1835, SP, RG 30/83, microfilm, OCA.

issue, “God willing...I shall bless God for the privilege of wearing out as your servant for Christ's sake.”<sup>101</sup>

The colonists and trustees thus had before them a clear choice: either remain ensnared by the prevailing prejudices of the day, deny their fundamental principles, and lose their visionary leader, or they could recommit themselves to the utopian vision of the founders and concentrate their efforts into a millennial work the likes of which America had never seen. To decide the matter once and for all, a special meeting of the Oberlin trustees was called for February 9, 1835.<sup>102</sup> Though Shipherd remained absent, they met at his house, and the crucible that followed was intense. One participant wrote that the assembly was not only “riotous” and “turbulent,” but “filled with detraction” and “slander.” Shipherd’s letter was read again, but the board remained unable to reach a decision on the matter. After much prayer, “especially by a band of godly women,” they adjourned to meet again the next morning.<sup>103</sup>

The factions were almost evenly matched. Nathan P. Fletcher and the three other abolitionists on the board stood on the side of admission of African American students, while Philo P. Stewart and three others opposed the measure. It fell to John Keep, the newly appointed president of the board, to cast the deciding vote.<sup>104</sup> As a religious convert of Finney and an abolitionist convert of Theodore Dwight Weld, Keep could only consistently decide the matter in one way.<sup>105</sup> On February 10, “Father” John Keep’s vote in favor of admission “irregardless of color” decided the

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<sup>101</sup> John J. Shipherd, pastoral letter, January 27, 1835, in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, “Appendix,” 337-346.

<sup>102</sup> John Keep to Philo P. Stewart, Peter Pindar Pease, and Nathan P. Fletcher, January 19 (indexed as January 29), 1835, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 2, OCA.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*; Nathan P. Fletcher, “Critical Letters #3,” RG 7/1/3, Office of the Treasurer, Box 4, OCA; John Keep to Charles Grandison Finney, March 10, 1835, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 3, OCA; Charles Grandison Finney to Lewis Tappan, n.d., in Tappan, *Life of Arthur Tappan*, 240-241; Esther Shipherd to William W. Patton, September 1, 1875, in William W. Patton, *Prayer and its Remarkable Answers: Being a Statement of Facts in the Light of Reason and Revelation* (New York, 1885), 176-177.

<sup>104</sup> John Keep to Charles Grandison Finney, March 10, 1835, Charles Grandison Finney papers, Microfilm, OCA; John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, May 17, 1835, SP, RG 30/83, Box 4, OCA.

<sup>105</sup> John Keep to Theodore Dwight Weld, October 20, 1834, *Weld Letters*, I:173-174.

matter.<sup>106</sup> The board recorded in its minutes a resolution giving Oberlin faculty complete control over the internal management of the institution, including admissions.<sup>107</sup>

This final resolution, as recorded in the minutes, reflects the board's lingering tentativeness: "*Resolved* That the education of the people of color is a matter of great interest and should be encouraged ~~in every proper way & measure~~ & sustained in this institution."<sup>108</sup> Though the resolution only went as far as absolutely necessary to satisfy the principal parties, it satisfied them nonetheless. It committed the Oberlin community to abolitionism in a way that even its newest theology professor, Finney, would appreciate. In fact, the resolution passed by the board was almost exactly Finney's own words. In a January letter to Henry Stanton and George Whipple, Finney had laid out his main condition for coming to Oberlin: "that the question of receiving students without distinction of color *be left with the faculty*."<sup>109</sup> By using Finney's own language in the resolution, the board sought to accomplish its desired ends through the understated means they believed would be most likely to allow it to reach them.

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<sup>106</sup> John Keep to Charles Grandison Finney, March 10, 1835, RG 30/24, FP, Box 6, Folder 3, OCA; Esther Shipherd to William W. Patton, September 1, 1875, in Patton, *Prayer and its Remarkable Answers*, 176-177.

<sup>107</sup> John Keep to Charles Grandison Finney, February 12, 1835, RG 30/24, FP, Box 6, Folder 3, OCA; Oberlin Trustee Minutes, February 9, 1835, RG 30/24, FP, Box 15, Folder 7, OCA; Helen Keep, "John Keep and his Descendants," n.d., 8, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 1, OCA.

<sup>108</sup> Oberlin Trustee Minutes, February 9, 1835, RG 30/24, FP, Box 15, Folder 7, OCA

<sup>109</sup> Charles Grandison Finney to Henry B. Stanton and George Whipple, January 18, 1835, Charles Grandison Finney papers, Microfilm, OCA; Charles Grandison Finney to the Board of Trustees of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute, June 30, 1835, Charles Grandison Finney papers, Microfilm, OCA; Finney, *Memoirs*, 380. That the board's resolution so closely resembles Finney's words suggests that he and Oberlin had been in closer contact than the surviving documents suggest. For Oberlin's resolution, see John Keep to Charles Grandison Finney, February 12, 1835, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 3, OCA.



**Illustration 2.3: Asa Mahan  
(Oberlin College Archives)**

The common complaint was that the school's race-blind policy would "congregate such a mass of negroes at Oberlin as to darken the whole atmosphere," eventually turning it into an all-Black "Dyed in the Wool" school.<sup>110</sup> In the racist atmosphere of Ohio, a policy explicitly committed to this end, however admirable in purists' eyes, could be fatal to Oberlin's survival. Finney realized that by demanding faculty control of the admissions process, it would be placed in the hands of avowed antislavery men like himself, Mahan, Morgan, and others who would soon be recruited in no small part because of their commitment to abolitionism. The effect, as Finney and the board saw it, would be no different than an explicit commitment to African American equality, yet it would do so in a way that protected the Institution from

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<sup>110</sup> John Keep to Charles Grandison Finney, March 10, 1835, Charles Grandison Finney papers, microfilm, roll 3, OCA; Benjamin Woodbury to John J. Shipherd, March 26, 1835, RG 30/24, FP, Box 14, Folder 8, OCA.



racist assaults and accusations of unmerited affirmative action in behalf of abolitionism.

The Lane-via-Cumminsville Rebels left their warehouse/seminary in April 1835 to begin the trek north to Oberlin.<sup>111</sup> On their way, they were joined at Putnam by several of their new Oberlin Institute colleagues including Timothy B. Hudson and Professor Henry Cowles at the inaugural state convention of Ohio abolitionists. The Western Reserve Anti-Slavery Society, including several men with Oberlin connections such as Shipherd, Owen Brown, Cowles, and Hudson, had issued a call for the state convention in the fall of 1834. With the new students from Lane included among the delegates connected to the Oberlin Institute and community, it was clear that they would make up the core of the new state society. Cowles and Hudson were primarily responsible for writing the Society's constitution, and though still en route to Oberlin, Finney was appointed as one of the Society's Vice Presidents and Mahan to the board of managers, which also included Cowles and Hudson. Mahan made his apologies in a letter to the convention, but its tone reflected the mood for the entire three day convention, as well as the society's years of agitation to come. Boldly, he announced, "Sir, I am an abolitionist. In every station and relation in life, I would be known as such, while a single slave groans beneath the oppressor's yoke, or bleeds beneath the oppressor's scourge."<sup>112</sup>

Weld was selected to head up the committee responsible for drafting a declaration of sentiments. When he presented the document to the convention, the Oberlin throng "fearlessly" subscribed their names to it. The ideas expressed in the Declaration were not new, but they were yet another fresh vindication of the

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<sup>111</sup> Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 348; A.L. Shumway and C. deW. Brower, *Oberliniana: A Jubilee Volume of Semi-Historical Anecdotes Connected with the Past and Present of Oberlin College, 1833-1883* (Cleveland, 1883), 17.

<sup>112</sup> *Proceedings of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Convention Held at Putnam on the Twenty-Second, Twenty-Third, and Twenty-Fourth of April, 1835*, 51.

perfectionist bases of abolitionism. They rejected slavery because it was a sin, “always, every where, and only sin...All the incidental effects of the system flow spontaneously from this fountain-head.” It was wrapped up in every aspect of American life; its victims were not only the slaves, but the slaveholders, the church, the nation, and all its citizens. It contradicted God’s law that the slave was a man distinct from a thing, a moral agent rather than an extension of another’s will. The only solution, the only chance of salvation, was immediate emancipation, “the sacred duty of the slaves and the imperative duty of their masters.”<sup>113</sup>

The Oberlin community quickly became the darling of abolitionists and scourge of anti-abolitionists across the country. Their wholesale adoption of the Lane cast-offs and assumption of the leadership of the antislavery movement in Ohio thrust them into the highest echelon of antislavery celebrity. In April, 1835, Shipherd was the special guest at a meeting of abolitionists in Boston including Samuel J. May and George Thompson who resolved to cordially recommend Oberlin “to the *confidence & support* of the Christian public.” In addition, a committee was appointed to solicit donations, and many, including May, Thompson, and Amasa Walker made generous subscriptions.<sup>114</sup> Arthur Tappan, president of the American Anti-Slavery Society, made good his word to Oberlin by advertising the college whenever he could as well as making available more than seventeen thousand dollars to Oberlin by October of 1835, ten thousand in the form of a loan as well as over seven thousand of his original pledge.<sup>115</sup> Other Eastern abolitionists repented of their earlier financial support of

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<sup>113</sup> *Proceedings of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Convention Held at Putnam on the Twenty-Second, Twenty-Third, and Twenty-Fourth of April, 1835*.5, 6-8; *Liberator*, May 16, 1835.

<sup>114</sup> “Minutes of Meeting in Relation to Oberlin Ins. held Apr. 8, 1835 with a Subn. List,” RG 16/5/3, Autograph File, OCA; See also *First Annual Report of the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society* (Philadelphia, 1835), 6, Samuel J. May Anti-Slavery Collection, Cornell University.

<sup>115</sup> John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, October 9, 1835, SP, RG 30/83, OCA; Arthur Tappan to Levi Burrell, October 6, 1835, RG 30/24, FP, Box 14, Folder 7, OCA; Arthur Tappan to John J. Shipherd, October 1, 1835, RG 30/24, FP, Box 14, Folder 7, OCA; Tappan, *Life of Arthur Tappan*, 238; Delia Finn to Richard Finn, August 21, 1835, RG 30/24, FP, Box 3, Folder 3, OCA; *Liberator*, August 30, 1839; Arthur Tappan to John J. Shipherd, June 10, 1835, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 8. Oberlin

Lane, now generally viewed in antislavery circles as an “anti abolition school,” and offered penance by making even more generous donations to the Oberlin Institute and publicly chronicling their turnabout in the antislavery press.<sup>116</sup>

Agents of the school were sent out in the fall of 1835 specifically to recruit committed abolitionists into the faculty. Shipherd wrote from Utica, New York that he hoped his visit to an antislavery convention there would result in the securing of a general agent for foreign service and several professors. Ultimately, distinguished abolitionists Cowles, Hudson, James Thome, James M. Buchanan, Horace Taylor, Alvan Stewart, James G. Birney, and others were appointed to faculty positions (though Birney and Stewart would be unable to make the move to Oberlin). The passionate abolitionist Owen Brown was named a member of the board of trustees.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, opponents of the admission of African American students, including founder Philo P. Stewart, soon left Oberlin or resigned their positions on the board. Nathan P. Fletcher remarked that these men, “unholy in principles,” should have actually resigned long before they did.<sup>118</sup> Finneyite abolitionists soon dominated the administration, a fact that was reflected in the excuses of many of those who now refused to aid the Oberlin enterprise; “Finneyism, Abolitionism, etc.” were damnable offenses in many people’s eyes.<sup>119</sup>

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named its most prominent building Tappan Hall in his honor. Tappan conceded to the honor reluctantly, telling Shipherd that he did “not object to your giving mine [name] to the Hall, but I have no ambition to be immortalized in brick and mortar.”

<sup>116</sup> T.P. Bigelow to Asa Mahan, August 23, 1836, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 3, OCA; *Liberator*, June 27, July 11, 1835.

<sup>117</sup> Oberlin Trustee Minutes, January 1, 1835, April 6, 1835, May 28, 1835, November 23, 1835, March 8, 1836, RG 30/24, FP, Box 15, Folder 7, OCA; Alvan Stewart to Levi Burrell, March 23, 1836, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 3, OCA; *General Catalog of Oberlin College, 1833-1908* (Oberlin, 1909), int.121-int.184. After 1836, almost all new faculty were drawn directly from the growing number of Oberlin Institute alumni, perhaps to assure that the peculiar beliefs of “Oberlin” would continue with a minimal amount of outside influences. See Juanita Fletcher, “Against the Consensus: Oberlin College and the Education of American Negroes, 1835-1865,” (Ph. D. dissertation, The American University, 1974), 111.

<sup>118</sup> Nathan P. Fletcher to the Trustees of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute, August 18, 1836, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 3, OCA.

<sup>119</sup> John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, April 1, 1835, RG 30/84, SP, Box 4, OCA.

On July 1, a new age in American reform commenced in Oberlin when Finney, Mahan, and Morgan were officially inaugurated at the school's first anniversary meeting. However, despite what some historians have argued, Oberlin was not simply "re-founded" in 1835.<sup>120</sup> Rather, the community and college had essentially renewed their binding vows to one another and clarified certain latent points in their founding ideals. Shipherd's letter and their response to it had recommitted the Oberlin community to unqualified Christian brotherhood, now explicitly embodied in racial inclusiveness and pledged to the abolition of slavery. Under the "Great Tent," a huge canvas construction purchased for the Oberlin Institute by their New York benefactors and called the "Tabernacle of the Most High God," "Father" John Keep symbolically presented the three men with copies of the charter of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute. Keep, the champion and protector of Shipherd's ideals, was entrusting the new heads of the school with the responsibility for carrying out Oberlin's sacred mission from that point forward.<sup>121</sup>

In his sermon that afternoon, Finney laid out Oberlin's future for all to behold. He announced his intention to adhere to the dream of John J. Shipherd, namely, to train up multitudes of ministers and influence laymen who would then go out from Oberlin to do God's bidding and hasten the millennium. With his new flock, Finney designed to "pitch [the Great Tent] in the enemies' camp."<sup>122</sup> Shipherd wholeheartedly approved of Finney's direction, and prayed that God would guide this

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<sup>120</sup> See James W. Fraser, *A History of Hope: When Americans Have Dared to Dream of a Better Future* (New York, 2002), 85-86; Clint Bolick, *Changing Course: Civil Rights at the Crossroads* (Piscataway, NJ, 1988), 19; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 726.

<sup>121</sup> John J. Shipherd to Joshua Leavitt, July 6, 1835, in *New York Evangelist*, July 18, 1835; *Ohio Observer*, July 9, 1835; "Commencement, 1835," RG College General, Series XV, Box 1, OCA; Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 73-74; Finney, *Memoirs*, 384.

<sup>122</sup> John J. Shipherd to Joshua Leavitt, July 6, 1835, in *New York Evangelist*, July 18, 1835. Indeed, the Oberlin tent made its appearances at many antislavery meetings over the next few decades. See *Liberator*, November 19, 1847, June 4, 1852.

course “by the pillar of cloud and fire; and through this new mode of warfare conquer multitudes of his enemies.”<sup>123</sup>

Luckily for Oberlin, radical student-soldiers were never in short supply since the school was one of the few educational opportunities still open to them in the mid to late 1830s. Indeed, conservatives in academia had made it nearly impossible for aggressively progressive young students to pursue their education unencumbered.<sup>124</sup> The contagion of anti-abolitionism was not limited to Western Reserve College. Also in 1835, fifty students left Phillips-Andover Academy because they were forbidden to form antislavery societies.<sup>125</sup> Amherst President Heman Humphrey demanded the dissolution of his school’s antislavery society, and similar demands and circumstances embroiled Hamilton College, Hanover College, Marietta College, and Miami College in the battle over the right to discuss abolitionism.<sup>126</sup> After recounting the events that had “reformed” nearly all other schools of any abolitionist tendencies, the conservative editor of the *Western Monthly Magazine* remarked that “it is believed that there now remains but one school in which murder and robbery are inculcated as christian [sic] virtues”: it was “the Oberlin Institute in Ohio.”<sup>127</sup>

Thus by 1835, many of America’s more progressive students had enrolled at the Oberlin Institute. From its opening in 1833 to the 1835 academic year, the student population grew by nearly seven hundred percent, and once again, the school was

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<sup>123</sup> John J. Shipherd to Joshua Leavitt, July 6, 1835, in *New York Evangelist*, July 18, 1835.

<sup>124</sup> *Liberator*, August 30, 1839.

<sup>125</sup> John King Lord, *A History of Dartmouth College, 1815-1909* (Concord, NH, 1913), 251; Benjamin Platt Thomas, *Theodore Weld: Crusader for Freedom* (Charlottesville, 1973), 87; Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *A School of the Church: Andover Newton Across Two Centuries* (Grand Rapids, 2008), 71.

<sup>126</sup> J.W. Davis to Theodore Dwight Weld, February 22, 1832, *Weld Letters*, 1:266-267; William S. Tyler, *A History of Amherst College, During the Administrations of its First Five Presidents from 1821 to 1891* (New York, 1895), 90-92; Edward W. Carpenter and Charles F. Morehouse, *The History of the Town of Amherst, Massachusetts* (Amherst, 1896), 172-173; Howard D. Williams, *A History of Colgate University, 1819-1969* (Berkeley, 1969), 69; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 184; William E. Van Vuget, *British Buckeyes: The English, Scots, & Welsh in Ohio, 1700-1900* (Kent, 2006), 192-193; Gail Deibler Finke, *Images of America: College Hill* (Mount Pleasant, SC, 2004), 24.

<sup>127</sup> *Western Monthly Magazine*, Vol. V (April, 1836), 224.

strapped for space.<sup>128</sup> One colonist assured a correspondent that they did not quite have to “live in ‘hollow trees,’” but still, most were considerably cramped in their quarters.<sup>129</sup> Even its new president felt the squeeze. When Asa Mahan and his family arrived in Oberlin, they were initially crammed into the old Pease cabin, and even after they moved into their own house, the Mahan’s had as many as eighteen people living under their roof at one time.<sup>130</sup> A makeshift and too-obviously temporary barracks was quickly raised to house the Rebels and their followers. Originally called “Slab Hall” after the material of its construction, the 20 x 144 foot building would come to be better known as “Cincinnati Hall” or “Rebel Hall” after its primary occupants.<sup>131</sup>



**Illustration 2.4: Cincinnati Hall (aka “Slab Hall” or “Rebel Hall”)  
(from Shumway, et al *Oberliniana* (1883))**

<sup>128</sup> *New York Evangelist*, January 16, April 2, 1836; John Keep to Gerrit Smith, October 14, 1836, RG 30/24, FP, Box 19, OCA; *General Catalog of Oberlin College, 1833-1908* (Oberlin, 1909), Int.117. Oberlin enrolled 44 students in the winter of 1833, 101 in 1834, and 276 in 1835.

<sup>129</sup> James Dascomb and Marianne Dascomb to “Dear Mother,” April 7, 1835, in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, “Appendix,” 348-353.

<sup>130</sup> Hiram Wilson to Hamilton Hill, December 13, 1852, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 13, OCA; Edward H. Madden and James E. Hamilton, *Freedom and Grace: The Life of Asa Mahan* (Metuchen, NJ, 1982), 55, 230n6.

<sup>131</sup> James Dascomb and Marianne Dascomb to “Dear Mother,” April 7, 1835, in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, “Appendix,” 348-353; *Liberator*, August 30, 1839; C.G. Fairchild, “Slab Hall,” in (Oberlin) *Jubilee Notes* (March, 1883), 5-6; Leonard, *Story of Oberlin*, 413-414.

Even while the residence halls were under construction, they were often occupied by students who had nowhere else to bunk. Eager students filled Ladies Hall and Tappan Hall long before either building was completed, despite considerable danger to their safety.<sup>132</sup> Yet they continued to come, despite hardship and overcrowding, all hoping to be a part of what everybody agreed would be something important and special.<sup>133</sup> The sight of Charles Grandison Finney praying and Asa Mahan singing hymns while the buildings were being raised could only confirm them in their convictions.<sup>134</sup> A capable and pious group of people had been joined together in the West to become, as one Oberlin Institute trustee boasted, “*the decided opponent* of SLAVERY as it is practiced upon the colored people of the country.”<sup>135</sup> From that point onward, the Oberlin community would self-consciously stand as an example to the rest of the nation in that fight.

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<sup>132</sup> Philo P. Stewart to William Dawes, February 13, 1839, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 6, OCA; *New York Evangelist*, January 16, April 2, 1836; John Keep to Gerrit Smith, October 14, 1836, RG 30/24, FP, Box 19, OCA; Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, November 17, 1835, *Weld Letters*, I:242-245; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 186-190.

<sup>133</sup> *New York Evangelist*, January 16, April 2, 1836; Hiram Wilson to Hamilton Hill, December 13, 1852, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 13, OCA.

<sup>134</sup> P.D. Adams to Edna Adams, July 31, 1835, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 5, OCA.

<sup>135</sup> *Ohio Observer*, April 9, 1835.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *“A city upon a hill”: Utopian Oberlin*

The Oberlin community did not limit their reform agenda to just antislavery. Much like their new professor of theology Charles Grandison Finney, Oberlinites saw abolitionism as a fundamental yet partial element of their perfectionist Christianity. John J. Shipherd and Philo P. Stewart had undertaken their Oberlin enterprise to found a bulwark against sin in all its forms; it was to be a center for reform in the most fundamental sense of the word. Even before the addition of the abolitionist faculty, Oberlin had been founded as a community and school to re-form the world.

The founders had consciously sought out the most pious people in America, and the new gathered community drew up a covenant by which all colonists should live and govern themselves. They shared elaborate plans to live lives which strove towards perfection, and to send out the educated products of this environment to help the young nation towards the path of regeneration and prepare it for the coming reign of God on earth. Their plan was to cast race, class, and gender by the wayside of the triumphant march of progress and to serve as a beacon of Christian reform. As Shipherd wrote in 1834, “if the ch[urch] in gnl. is a city set upon a hill, Oberlin is on the pinnacle of that hill, both to observation and temptation; for Satan wars against us with a vengeance.”<sup>1</sup>

### ***“A CITY THAT CANNOT BE HID”***

Oberlin had, since its founding, developed as a utopian community similar to many of the other utopian experiments which popped up across the United States in the 1830s and 1840s. At least one hundred of these ventures were brought into

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, April 14, 1834, RG 30/83, SP, Box 4, OCA.



existence between the American Revolution and the Civil War. Though their foundational base included a wide range of motivations, all strove in some way for a radically new social order. However, most were relatively short-lived, lasting no more than a few years before disbanding.<sup>2</sup>

Utopia was a deceptively unreachable ideal—a society where all physical, social, and spiritual forces worked together to fulfill mankind’s greatest and most worthy aspirations. In this ideal world, citizens lived and worked together in a social order that was both self-selecting and self-perpetuating. As Rosabeth M. Kanter points out, in a utopia, “what people want to do is the same as what they have to do; the interests of the individuals are congruent with the interests of the group.” Nineteenth century communitarians sought comfort and security in the notion that their social order eliminated the need for competition and self-interest and replaced them with mutual responsibility and reliance.<sup>3</sup> Yet this unforgiving and complete dependence on disinterested human agency also made these communities precarious assemblages.

Utopian communities varied widely and are difficult for historians to categorize. Some were based on clear and explicit directives, others were nearly anarchic and disorganized. The general tendency is to divide the communities into

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<sup>2</sup> Incredibly, few scholars mention Oberlin in their discussions of utopianism. The *Historical Dictionary of Utopianism* describes Oberlin simply as follows: “**OBERLIN COLONY.** Founded in 1833 in Lorain County, Ohio, by eight recent immigrant families from New England and New York, the Oberlin colonists hoped to establish a community based on communal ownership of property. Their leader was John Shipherd. They also wanted to establish a school where children would receive a Christian education. Absorbed by Oberlin College in 1841, the colony faded away within two years.” Besides its factual errors, critical omissions, and dubious assertions, this does not differ markedly from what others have written. See James Mathew Morris and Andrea L. Kross, *Historical Dictionary of Utopianism* (Lanham, MD, 2004), 229; George W. Knepper, *Ohio and its People* (Kent, OH, 2003), 171; Walters, *American Reformers*, 39-41; Mark Holloway, *Utopian Communities in America, 1680-1880* (Mineola, NY, 1966), 17-30; Anna Lisa Peterson, *Seeds of the Kingdom: Utopian Communities in the Americas* (New York, 2005), 3-15; Robert S. Fogarty, *American Utopianism* (Itasca, IL, 1972, ix-xi.

<sup>3</sup> Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge, 1972), 1.

either those founded on religious principles or those with more secular aims.<sup>4</sup> John Humphrey Noyes, himself the leader of one of America's most famous utopian communities, noticed this difference in his reflections on the nation's utopian past. He lamented the fact that the religious and secular groups did not join together on the basis of their many similarities. Both generally believed in the perfectability of mankind, and they shared a confidence that the millennium was close at hand. To Noyes, each type failed because they rejected the most essential aspects of what the other offered. The religious perfectionists "failed for want of regeneration of society," and the secularists "failed for want of regeneration of the heart."<sup>5</sup>

However, historian Ronald G. Walters writes that this classification, like so many others, may be most interesting when it breaks down.<sup>6</sup> The Oberlin community is exemplary here. Oberlin was a town and college that not only rebuked the dominant American society, but, as an intensive training ground, sent out reformers to change the perceived problems in the world at large. The Christian life that Finney urged his listeners to follow was not just inward-looking, as some important utopian communities were. In Oberlin, Christian perfection would not be accomplished by simple self-reflection and inaction—it had to be continuously nurtured by constant action on behalf of God and the rest of His universe.<sup>7</sup>

Charles Finney reminded the residents of Oberlin of their exceptionalism. As part of *Oberlin* they possessed responsibilities far beyond the civic duties of most Americans. In the *Oberlin Evangelist*, he declared to each of his Oberlin readers, "You are a professor of the religion of Jesus Christ. Your profession of religion has

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Robert P. Sutton, *Communal Utopias and the American Experience: Religious Communities, 1732-2000* (Westport, 2003) and Robert P. Sutton, *Communal Utopias and the American Experience: Secular Communities, 1824-2000* (Westport, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (Philadelphia, 1870), 24-28.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* (New York, 1997), 41.

<sup>7</sup> See Hewitt, *Regeneration and Morality*, 47-49.

placed you on high, as ‘a city that cannot be hid.’ The eyes of God, of Christians, of the world, of hell are upon you.”<sup>8</sup> The allusion to God’s chosen “city upon a hill” as well as the religious mission of the Pilgrims was not lost on many who were part of the Oberlin community. Similar references frequently occurred in residents’ correspondence and even student compositions.<sup>9</sup> One resident described Oberlin Institute, the most tangible result of Oberlin’s errand into the wilderness, to William Lloyd Garrison as “the Pilgrim School. It is so, most emphatically.”<sup>10</sup>

The Oberlin community’s utopianism, like that of their Pilgrim forebears, was that of an intentional community. Rather than a normal community that began spontaneously and then continued for generations, the Oberlin community was created as a deliberate effort to realize a specific goal or set of goals, in this case, the salvation of the world. To be operational (not to mention durable), such a community had to present a unique agenda that would attract and then retain its followers. To that end, and also similar to their Puritan predecessors, Oberlin was a self-governing, self selecting body committed to an explicit agenda in the form of a covenant to which all early settlers had to affix their names. Colonists were recruited based on the degree to which their personal aspirations aligned with those set out in the covenant. The goals of the community were more likely to be realized if it were peopled with those who intrinsically exhibited adherence to the terms of the covenant than those whose obedience required coercive enforcement.<sup>11</sup> Shipherd and Stewart unfolded their

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<sup>8</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 13, 1839.

<sup>9</sup> See D. Woodbury to John J. Shipherd, July 13, 1834, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 1, OCA; J.B. Trew to Andrew Trew, May 29, 1843, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 6, OCA; Mary Sheldon, “The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers,” July 9, 1849, RG 30/200, Mary Sheldon papers, Microfilm, OCA.

<sup>10</sup> *Liberator*, August 30, 1839.

<sup>11</sup> See John W. Friesen and Virginia Lyons Friesen, *The Palgrave Companion to North American Utopias* (New York, 2004), 9-15.

covenant in several private letters early in the planning process, but the actual pledge to which colonists subscribed is worth discussing in further detail.<sup>12</sup>

The Oberlin Covenant began with the following preamble:

Lamenting the degeneracy of the church and the deplorable condition of our perishing world, and ardently desirous of bringing both under the entire influence of the blessed gospel of peace; and viewing with peculiar interest the influence which the valley of the Mississippi must assert over our nation and the nations of the earth; and having, as we trust, in answer to devout supplications, been guided by the counsel of the Lord: The undersigned Covenant together under the name of Oberlin Colony, subject to the following regulations...<sup>13</sup>

Colonists promised to make their residence in Oberlin for the express purpose of glorifying God. They further pledged that though they would hold property as individuals, they would live as though they held “a community of property,” and, significantly, not to hold in their possession more property or land than they could “profitably manage for God as his faithful stewards.” What extra they had would be used “for the spread of the Gospel.”<sup>14</sup>

With regards to their day-to-day lifestyles, Oberlin colonists covenanted to eat only plain and wholesome food, renounce all bad habits (especially tobacco and strong drink), and to shun luxury goods “simply calculated to gratify the palate” so that they may have more time, money, and health to use in the Lord's service. They renounced all expensive and unwholesome fashions of dress, particularly tight dressing and

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<sup>12</sup> See John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, August 13, 1832, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA; John J. Shipherd to Zebulon R. Shipherd, August 6, 1832, RG 30/83, SP, microfilm, OCA.

<sup>13</sup> “Covenant of the Oberlin Colony,” RG 21, VI, Box 1, Oberlin File, OCA.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

ornamental attire, and agreed to restrict themselves to “plainness and durability” in the construction of their homes, furnishings, and all else “that appertains to us.”<sup>15</sup>

The covenant also governed their relations with each other. They pledged to strive continually to demonstrate that they were “as the body of Christ...member[s] one of another.” For the experiment to succeed, they covenanted to give special emphasis to thoroughly educating the children of the colony and to “train them up in body, intellect and heart, for the service of the Lord.” To that end, they agreed that the interest of the Oberlin Institute would be of primary importance in their lives, and that they would do all in their power “to extend its influence to our fallen race.” All these assurances were pledged in order that Oberlinites could “maintain deep-toned and elevated personal piety,” “provoke each other to love and good works,” “live together in all things as brethren,” and to “glorify God in our bodies and spirits, which are His.”<sup>16</sup>

In fact, the Oberlin community followed a version of reform similar to Finney’s long before the revivalist was officially associated with the school or town. All of Oberlin’s rules sought to check particular obstacles to Christian regeneration, and the covenant covered all seven deadly sins and then some. Colonists did not hold up one section as more important than another; everything came down to each subscriber choosing to do right by one another—to live by the biblical injunction to love one’s neighbor as one’s self.

Keeping to any one part of the covenant necessarily meant much more than simply following a single rule, and the connections between the covenant and Oberlin’s attempt to rid the world of sin were legion. For instance, living as a community of property holders but holding only so much as could be legitimately put

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<sup>15</sup> “Covenant of the Oberlin Colony,” RG 21, VI, Box 1, Oberlin File, OCA..

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

to good use discouraged greed. A society that lacked such avarice and materialism would be a society that knew no class distinctions. Moreover, working one's own lands would inculcate an increased respect for the value of labor and desire that everyone, white or Black, free or enslaved, should realize it. Avoidance of strong drink and other stimulants or depressants completely precluded addiction and therefore its deleterious effects on families, personal relationships, and clarity and purity of thought. The requirement of modest clothing and bland foods supposedly curtailed lust and temptation, strengthened families, and encouraged respect among community members as equals.<sup>17</sup>

The covenant was the foundational document for a community that sought utopia. Residents clearly sought a God-centered life and heaven on earth, and the town was a religious community even as it became the headquarters and ideological foundation of abolitionism in the West. Its basic antislavery views were a product of its religiosity. Once Oberlin had procured the brilliant theological minds of Asa Mahan and Charles Grandison Finney, it also became possible to develop a particular theological expression of the perfection towards which they wanted to strive. Oberlin thinkers rejected the extreme Calvinist doctrine of election and advocated individual salvation and free will. As free spiritual agents, men and women were individually able to either accept or reject the salvation of Jesus Christ and live their lives while consciously and constantly rejecting sin.

The intense revivals that gripped the Oberlin community as soon as Finney and Mahan arrived led to more discussion of the idea of sanctification.<sup>18</sup> Besides winning

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<sup>17</sup> E.J. Comings, "Thoughts on Temperance," c.1837, MS, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 10, E.J. Comings papers, OCA; See also Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 82-83; Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, 166; Walters, *American Reformers*, 13; Robert Samuel Fletcher, "Bread and Doctrine at Oberlin," *The Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, Vol.49 (January, 1940), 58-67.

<sup>18</sup> Davis Prudden to Peter Prudden, October 7, 1836, RG 30/205, Prudden family papers, OCA; Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology, Embracing Ability (Natural, Moral, and Gracious), Repentance, Impenitence, Faith and Unbelief, Justification, Sanctification, Elocution*,

converts, Oberlin's religious leaders also wanted to provide the already-saved some further assurances against the temptations of the world and instructions in how to live more like their Savior. Towards this end, they addressed one particular question that arose in these discussions: how completely one could hope to overcome temptation in one's earthly life, and by extension, how near to perfection could one hope to come. Together, Mahan, Finney, Henry Cowles, John Morgan, and others arrived at what would become known as the Oberlin doctrine of Christian Perfection, or complete sanctification.<sup>19</sup>

Just as God forgives one's sins after sincere repentance (justification), so too could He give one the ability to conquer temptation and lead a sinless life if one truly let Him (sanctification).<sup>20</sup> God would allow the truly faithful to solidly grasp righteousness and would consecrate their will to do good. This sanctification, or second "baptism of the Holy Ghost" meant the attainment of a life totally pleasing to God.<sup>21</sup> The sanctified shifted their behavioral allegiance from sinful selfishness to virtuous and benevolent actions. The continuous and conscious decision to follow God's law would help keep the sanctified from sin, and would guide the righteous towards perfection and help establish God's kingdom on earth.<sup>22</sup>

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*Reprobation, Divine Purposes, Divine Sovereignty, and Perseverance* (Oberlin, 1847), 166-196; Charles Grandison Finney, "Recent Discussions on the Subject of Entire Sanctification in This Life," *Oberlin Quarterly Review*, Vol.II (May, 1847), 449-456; George Nye Boardman, *A History of New England Theology* (New York, 1899), 276-277.

<sup>19</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, 165-424, especially 166-196; Charles Grandison Finney "Recent Discussions on the Subject of Entire Sanctification in This Life," 449-456; Hannah Warner to Andrew Warner, March 15, 1841, RG 30/24, FP, Box 3, Folder 25, OCA; Boardman, *History of New England Theology*, 276-277.

<sup>20</sup> *Zion's Herald*, March 22, 1837.

<sup>21</sup> Asa Mahan, *Out of Darkness into Light, or, The Hidden Life Made Manifest* (London, 1875), 6, 27, 51, 160-175.

<sup>22</sup> See Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, 298-357; Finney, *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 43-66; Hannah Warner to Andrew Warner, March 15, 1841, RG 30/24, FP, Box 3, Folder 25, OCA; Strong, *Perfectionist Politics*, 27-28; Glenn A. Hewitt, *Regeneration and Morality: A Study of Charles Finney, Charles Hodge, John W. Nevins, and Horace Bushnell* (Brooklyn, 1991), 43-45.

In essence, there were various interpretations of perfectionism. It was Finney who first popularized the Wesleyan version of perfectionism during the Great Western Revival. However, some utopianists later devised a doctrine of security from sin that Finney never intended.<sup>23</sup> Still, the connection between perfecting the world in preparation for the second coming and abolition was acknowledged by nearly all spiritually-minded reformers including William Lloyd Garrison and others who did not follow Finney.

Nonetheless, the Oberlin community's version of Christian perfection that privileged human agency was one of the most talked-about topics within religious circles in the 1830s and 1840s, and it drew the ire of many more conservative divines in the press, pamphlets, and entire books.<sup>24</sup> Mahan's treatise on the concept, *Christian Perfection* (1838), was decried by religious conservatives in New York and the East as

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<sup>23</sup> Though it was Finney who first brought John H. Noyes to the idea of complete sanctification in 1831, Noyes later came to the conclusion that Christ's second coming had already occurred, that the overdue Kingdom of God could only be established if a few "perfected" Christians set an example for the rest of the world, and that he, as one of the few, had reached such a stage of perfection that made him *incapable* of sin. See John Humphrey Noyes and George Wallingford Noyes, *The Religious Experience of John Humphrey Noyes: Founder of the Oneida Community* (New York, 1923), 69-88; Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History to 1850* (Minneapolis, 1944), 185; Wendell Phillips Garrison and Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of his Life Told By His Children*, Vol.II (New York, 1885), 144; Varadaraja V. Raman, *Variety in Religion and Science* (Bloomington, 2005), 147-148; Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York, 2007), 292-304; Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Urbana, 1984), 76. Oberlin was careful to distance itself from this "heresy." Careful observers noted that "between Noyes and Mahan...and Oberlin, there had reigned a fraternal feud." Finney expressed his belief that Noyes was "deranged" and driven "into some extravagances." Mahan strenuously avoided any statement that suggested "the certainty of never sinning again," and Henry Cowles wrote to the Cleveland Observer to deny the charge that people in Oberlin believed that "we can in such a sense receive Christ that He shall act in us and displace our moral agency and personal responsibility so that we cannot sin." See Hannah Warner to Andrew Warner, March 15, 1841, RG 30/24, FP, Box 3, Folder 25, OCA; John H. Noyes, *The Berean: A Manual for the Help of Those Who Seek the Faith of the Primitive Church* (Putney, VT, 1847), 273-274; Noyes, *The Religious Experience of John Humphrey Noyes*, 69; Mahan, *Autobiography*, 233; William Hepworth Dixon, *New America*, Vol.II (London, 1867), 243; Charles Grandison Finney to John Humphrey Noyes, April 3, 1837, in Noyes, *Religious Experience*, 333-334;

<sup>24</sup> See Samuel Cowles to Henry Cowles, December 30, 1839, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 12, OCA; *An Exposition of the peculiarities, Difficulties, and Tendencies of Oberlin Perfectionism* (Cleveland, 1840).



the most “ominous” event “since the great revivals of 1830 and 1831.”<sup>25</sup> Others described Oberlin Perfectionism as “contrary to the teachings of the Holy Scriptures, as well as dangerous, if not utterly destructive to the life and growth of true holiness.”<sup>26</sup>

Oberlin Perfectionism confronted the free spiritual agents in Oberlin with the same guidance as did the Oberlin Covenant, only each person’s relationship was more explicitly with God rather than the community. Still, a community dedicated to serving God through right living necessarily retained its obligations to each other. By the 1840s, Oberlin’s brand of religious perfectionism had replaced the covenant in the daily regulation of citizens’ lives, since its ideas governed not just a handful of enumerated rules, but every decision of a person’s life. The last signature appended to the original covenant was added in 1839.<sup>27</sup> Perfectionism, however, remained a constant striving in the community for many more decades.

For the Oberlin community in its strivings against sin, the most pressing evil that stood in the way of American regeneration and “liv[ing] together in all things as brethren” was selfishness and the resulting artificial distinctions between members of American society.<sup>28</sup> These included not just chattel slavery, but gender and racial discrimination as well as the greed and class conflict that were clearly dividing the nation in the 1830s and 1840s. Oberlinites believed that true liberty could only flourish among people living in relative equality, stripped of all artificial obstacles standing between each person and their natural right to personal liberty and moral agency.<sup>29</sup> As Finney commonly expressed to his Oberlin audiences, God was “no

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<sup>25</sup> *New York Evangelist*, September 28, 1839; See also Nathaniel S. Folsom, “Review of Mahan on Christian Perfection,” *The American Biblical Repository*, Vol.2, No.3 (1839), 143-165; *The Methodist Quarterly Review*, (January, 1841), 123-155, and (April, 1841), 307-319.

<sup>26</sup> Boardman, *History of New England Theology*, 284.

<sup>27</sup> “Covenant of the Oberlin Colony,” RG 21, VI, Box 1, Oberlin File, OCA.

<sup>28</sup> Hannah Warner to Andrew Warner, March 15, 1841, RG 30/24, FP, Box 3, Folder 25, OCA.

<sup>29</sup> Strong, *Perfectionist Politics*, 20-21.

respector of persons,” and was “interested in the happiness of every individual.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, Oberlinites were urged to treat all people “as members of the government of God,” even to the extent they should not be thought of as men or women, black or white, just a person made in God’s image.<sup>31</sup> Oberlin wanted to truly democratize society, and it hoped to begin that process by blurring the accepted lines which divided it. As Professor James Fairchild wrote, “What men most require for the cultivation of fellow feeling, is to look at each other fairly in the face.”<sup>32</sup>

### **“CHEEK BY JOWL”: AFRICAN AMERICAN OBERLINITES**

Although the Oberlin Institute came to a strained sense of racial egalitarianism reluctantly, it was still significant. While it never became “the pool of Bethesda for the sin of prejudice,” as two alumni remembered in 1864, it still came closer “than any other place in the United States” to reaching total racial acceptance.<sup>33</sup> Over the years there were a few instances where white students expressed an uncomfortable degree of racism, but these were relatively few and far between.<sup>34</sup> Henry Cowles declared Oberlin’s “great business” to be “to educate mind and heart,” and he and other leaders would have little reason to be proud of their successes if they failed to eradicate “the notion that ‘nature’ has made any such difference between the colored and the white ‘classes’ that it would be wrong for either to associate with the other.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, January 15, 1840; Charles Grandison Finney, *Skeletons of a Course of Theological Lectures*, Vol.I (Oberlin, 1840), 88.

<sup>31</sup> E.J. Comings, “Notes on Finney’s Lectures on Pastoral Theology,” July, 1837, MS, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 10, OCA.

<sup>32</sup> J.H. Fairchild, *Oberlin: Its Origin, Progress and Results* (Oberlin, 1860), 33.

<sup>33</sup> *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, July 9, 1864; See also the conflicted racial views of Oberlin students expressed in James L. Wright to “Dear Sisters,” May 1, 1846, RG 30/24, FP, Box 10, Folder 17, OCA.

<sup>34</sup> Examples include a white preparatory student who in 1846 objected to being called “Brother” by an African American classmate, and, as James Fairchild remembered, “in a few instances, a colored and white boy had a quarrel.” Occasionally, Fairchild recalled that a Black student “imagined that some disrespect was shown him by a fellow student,” yet overall, white students accepted their African American classmates as “a man and a brother.” James H. Fairchild, *Oberlin: The Colony and the College, 1833-1883* (Oberlin, 1883), 113.

<sup>35</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 10, 1851.

The admissions policy at the Oberlin Institute after 1835 was designed “to elevate [African American students] to a common platform of intellectual, social, and religious life” as that available to white students across America. The faculty realized that simply offering African American students the chance to study at an all-Black school would only result in the perpetuation of a caste barrier that “a false system has reared between the races.” Though they admitted that to furnish such a school would admittedly be better than no school at all, Oberlin leaders hoped to meet the more difficult challenge of actually maintaining a school in the breach itself, and creating a totally unique learning environment where students of any race would feel comfortable.<sup>36</sup>

The trustees’ decision on admissions “irregardless of color” was predictably greeted with disapproval in many places outside of Oberlin. As the news spread and was distorted, many critics came to believe that the Oberlin Institute was actually pushing out its white students so that only African Americans would attend. One critic informed John J. Shipherd that if he did not keep the white and black students segregated to avoid charges of “amalgamation,” the whole Oberlin enterprise would “be blown *sky high*” and he would be left with “a black establishment there *thro’ out!*”<sup>37</sup> Satirist Charles Farrar Brown (under the *nom de plume* Artemus Ward) wrote that “its my onbiassed ‘pinion that they go it rather too strong on Ethiopians at Oberlin.” To support his claim, Brown wrote that on rainy days, white Oberlinites could not find their way through the streets without lamps, “there bein such a numerosity of cullerd pussons in the town.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Fairchild, *Oberlin: Its Origin, Progress and Results*, 28-29.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Woodbury to John J. Shipherd, March 26, 1835, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 2, OCA.

<sup>38</sup> Charles F. Brown, *Artemus Ward: His Book, With Many Comic Illustrations* (New York, 1862), 64; See also Nathan P. Fletcher, “Critical Letters, #3,” n.d., RG 7/1/3, Office of the Treasurer, Box 4, OCA.

In fact, African American students at the Oberlin Institute always made up but a small percentage of the student body.<sup>39</sup> By the end of 1835, only three African American students had enrolled at Oberlin: James Bradley, Charles H. Langston, and Gideon Langston. In any given year between 1835 to 1865, it is estimated that only between two to five percent of Oberlin's student population was African American.<sup>40</sup> Of the approximately 8,800 total students who attended Oberlin College before the Civil War, only slightly more than three percent were Black. However, though a small absolute number, these African American students who were educated at Oberlin before 1860 were more than at all other American colleges combined, and the numbers increased almost every year.<sup>41</sup>

George Boyer Vashon was the first African American to earn his college degree from the Oberlin Institute in 1844, and Lucy Stanton became the first Black female graduate in America in 1850. The background of each was representative of the majority of African American college students at the Oberlin Institute. Most were born free, though they were most often children of former slaves. Although it is difficult to trace the geographic origins of all African American students enrolled,

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<sup>39</sup> Most information regarding the names and number of African American students at Oberlin from 1835 to 1862 is drawn from the unofficial list compiled from memory by Professor Henry Cowles in 1862. The "Catalogue and Record of Colored Students in Oberlin, 1835 to 1862" contains the names of approximately 200 students who attended either the preparatory or collegiate departments. The list is incomplete, owing to the imprecision of memory as well as the increasing tendency in Oberlin to not consider African American students in any different light than those of other races. Since a student's race was seldom noted in official catalogues, these percentages are necessarily inexact. However, assuming that 5 percent is a relatively accurate number, African American students would never have numbered more than approximately 65 in a single year before the Civil War. See Accounts and Memoranda Books, 1835-1881, Henry Cowles papers, RG 30/27, Series V, Box 10, OCA; W.E. Bigglestone, "Oberlin College and the Negro Student, 1865-1940," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol.56, No.3 (July, 1971), 198.

<sup>40</sup> From the records available, the year of highest African American enrollment was the 1852-1853 school year. That year, John Keep counted 44 Black students in all the divisions of the Oberlin Institute. This was out of over 1000 students overall. See Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 536; Ellen N. Lawson and Marlene Merrill, "The Antebellum 'Talented Tenth': Black College Students at Oberlin Before the Civil War," *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol.52, No.2 (Spring, 1983), 143.

<sup>41</sup> James Oliver Horton, "Black Education at Oberlin College: A Controversial Commitment," *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol.54, No.4 (Autumn, 1985), 483n12.

generally about half of the students hailed from the South and half from the North. Also, the fact that these young men and women possessed the academic qualifications for admission to the collegiate course suggests that they had received significant private schooling beforehand. The Oberlin preparatory department accounts for many of these students' pre-college education, but others studied in private Black schools in such places as Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and Washington, D.C. Some of these were sent directly to Oberlin by abolitionists hoping "to elevate the colored race to a position above 'hewers of wood or drawers of water.'"<sup>42</sup>

Black education at Oberlin was also a family affair. Thirteen families accounted for nearly a third of all African American students enrolled at Oberlin before 1860.<sup>43</sup> These included the abolitionist Langston brothers: Gideon, Charles, and John as well as the Edmonson sisters, Emily and Mary, who had been rescued from the slave ship *Pearl* and supported at Oberlin with funds provided by Harriett Beecher Stowe. The Jones family (originally from North Carolina) is perhaps the best example of how much many Black Oberlin families valued education. Alan Jones made sure that four of his sons graduated from the Oberlin Institute before 1860, a record equaled by few white families in the nineteenth century.<sup>44</sup> When the first of these sons to enter Oberlin spoke seriously about dropping out, Alan Jones roughly led him to the back of their Oberlin house, pointed to an axe and chopping block, and told him to "take your choice. You go back to college or you lay your head on the

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<sup>42</sup> Susan Wade to Oberlin College, December 18, 1864, Letters Received by Oberlin College, microfilm roll 16. See also Lawson and Merrill, "The Antebellum 'Talented Thousandth'", 143-145, 149. Lewis Tappan, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Lloyd Garrison, John Mercer Langston, Frederick Douglass, Emily Howland, Levi Coffin, and others directed bright African American students to Oberlin.

<sup>43</sup> Lawson and Merrill, "The Antebellum 'Talented Thousandth'", 153.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, 147.

chopping block and I chop it off.”<sup>45</sup> Jones would have agreed with John Vashon in wanting his son to be among “the smartest youth in the world.”<sup>46</sup>

This was the intention of many involved in the Oberlin educational system. The day to day operations of the Oberlin community aimed to demonstrate the absurdity of racism and distinctions based on color to the outside world. As Boston abolitionist Lydia Maria Child pointed out in the year of Oberlin’s founding, few whites were “really aware of how oppressive the influence of society is made to bear upon [free] blacks.” They were segregated in church, refused entry into schools that white children attended, blocked from all employment that white workers could also perform, and largely excluded from the civic process. This was common knowledge to most Northerners, but few fully considered the implications of these arrangements.<sup>47</sup> The Oberlin community consciously set out to force Americans to think. South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun had once remarked that “if there could be found a Negro that could conjugate a Greek verb, he would give up all his preconceived ideas of the inferiority of the Negro.” To this, Oberlin College African American student Fanny Jackson Coppin declared, “let’s try him.”<sup>48</sup>

The Oberlin Institute was one of the few establishments of higher learning in America open to African American students. Oneida continued to accept male Black scholars into its ranks, but it was a lonely exception. Not until the 1840s, when a few colleges had been founded by men with Oberlin connections (including Olivet College

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<sup>45</sup> This son, James Monroe Jones, would go on to assist John Brown in planning his Harper’s Ferry raid and provisional government in the late 1850s. See Chapter 10. See also Carol C. Bowie to Mercedes Singleton, October 30, 1860, RG 30/157, Lawson-Merrill papers, Box 3, OCA; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, October 11, 1856; *American Missionary*, October, 1856.

<sup>46</sup> Benjamin Bowen to Oberlin College, March 21, 1842, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 8, OCA.

<sup>47</sup> Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, ed. Carolyn L. Karcher (Amherst, 1996), 187.

<sup>48</sup> Fanny Jackson Coppin, *Reminiscences of School Life, and Hints on Teaching* (Philadelphia, 1913), 19. Abolitionist Alexander Crummell also cited Calhoun’s remarks. See William H. Ferris, *Alexander Crummell: An Apostle of Negro Culture* (Washington, D.C., 1920), 11.



**Illustration 3.1: Fanny Jackson Coppin**  
(from Coppin, *Reminiscences of School Life* (1913))

in 1844 by John J. Shipherd) or modeled after the Oberlin example (as was the New York Central College in McGrawville, New York in 1849) were opportunities for African Americans of both sexes to gain a college education significantly expanded.<sup>49</sup> However, though the Oberlin Institute's uniqueness attracted negative attention from proslavery advocates and racist enemies, even they could not deny the results of Black education when the students were given an opportunity to blossom. Oberlin African Americans always believed that education was "the most potent means for the redemption of the Half-Free and the Slave," and their own institution developed into one of the preeminent colleges of the era.<sup>50</sup> Oberlin's African American students

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<sup>49</sup> See Lucy Stone to Antoinette Brown, June 9, 1850, in *Friends and Sisters: Letters Between Lucy Stone and Antoinette Brown Blackwell, 1846-1893*, ed. Carol Lasser and Marlene Merrill (Urbana, 1987), 72-75; *New York Times*, August 9, 1854; Walter Dyson, *Howard University, The Capstone of Negro Education: A History, 1867-1940* (Washington, D.C., 1940), 349; *Liberator*, July 18, 1851.

<sup>50</sup> *The North Star*, January 12, 1849; Karl F. Geiser, "The Western Reserve in the Anti-Slavery Movement," *Proceedings of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association for the Year 1911-1912*,

celebrated the fact that, unlike at Harvard or Yale, “the blackest child of the poorest parents may drink of the healing stream” of higher education.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, Oberlin’s egalitarian goals were impressive to African Americans. As alumnus Fanny Jackson Coppin asserted in 1864, “Prejudice in Oberlin is preached against, prayed against, sung against, and lived against,” so much that equal treatment was nearly unavoidable.<sup>52</sup> John M. Brown, Oberlin alumnus and future bishop of the A.M.E. Church, praised the school in 1844 as the only place in the United States where an African American could get an education “as cheap as he can at Oberlin, and at the same time be respected as a man.”<sup>53</sup> John Mercer Langston and Coppin credited Oberlin with regarding “a colored man as a *man*” while never making it seem as if they were “conferring a favor upon him by so doing.”<sup>54</sup>

The only distinctions made between white and African American students were those based on “character” and “those founded on mental and moral worth.”<sup>55</sup> Though it does not appear that students of different races ever shared a room, the Oberlin Institute’s student boarding halls were integrated, as were the dining rooms, all classes, and religious exercises.<sup>56</sup> African Americans were elected to leadership positions in prestigious student literary societies such as the Union Society,

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Vol.V (Cedar Rapids, 1912), 87; Willis Rudy, *The Campus and a Nation in Crisis: From the American Revolution to Vietnam* (Madison, NJ, 1996), 52. Oberlin became one of the largest colleges in the antebellum United States. By 1850, its enrollment was the highest of any college in American history to that point. Its enrollment in 1860 was 1,311, compared to Harvard’s 848 and Yale’s 642. See also *Colored American*, n.d., in *Philanthropist*, November 14, 1837.

<sup>51</sup> *The North Star*, January 12, 1849; See also David Prudden to George P. Prudden, August 21, 1838, RG 30/24, FP, Box 11, Folder 10, OCA; William White to Asa Mahan, April 30, 1840, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 7, OCA.

<sup>52</sup> *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, July 9, 1864; See also Finney, *Memoirs*, 411-412.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel Alexander Payne, *The Semi-Centenary and the Retrospection of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (Baltimore, 1866), 65.

<sup>54</sup> *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, July 9, 1864.

<sup>55</sup> Hiram Elams, H.C. Taylor, and M.E. Strieby to John Keep and Willian Dawes, May 11, 1839, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 6, OCA.

<sup>56</sup> See *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 10, 1845, November 6, 1850; Brown, *Artemus Ward*, 67; Oberlin First Congregational Church Records, RG 31/4/1, Box 1, OCA; John Keep to Gerrit Smith, January 16, 1836, RG 30/24, FP, Box 9, OCA.



Theological Literary Society, and the Young Ladies' Literary Society. Though there was not an African American faculty member in the antebellum decades, select Black students were among those chosen to serve as teachers in the preparatory department. Fanny Jackson Coppin was one of these instructors in 1864 and 1865. Though she remembered that some of her students were surprised when they first saw their teacher, there were no signs of insubordination. Eventually, her class became so popular that it had to be divided into four sections. She well remembered the delight of principal Edward Fairchild when he had to subdivide her class once enrollment topped eighty. She summed up her Oberlin teaching experience as "an overwhelming success."<sup>57</sup>

The Oberlin community also encouraged its non-student African American residents to excel. When added to the perfectionist atmosphere already impelling Oberlinites to self-reliance and excellence in all they did, it produced a class of African American citizens that were able to stand as a rebuke to racist arguments that claimed that they were incapable of fending for themselves in a modern society. "Businessmen are colored," one Cleveland observer noted, "and for enterprise, as far as their capital allows, they are equal to their white competitors." Even though successful African American businessmen and women were not unheard of in antebellum America, in Oberlin, they operated without the same stigmas that often applied elsewhere. "The usual prejudice against Black tradesmen exists here in a very slight degree, if at all," an observer wrote, "A man is regarded in Oberlin, to a great extent, according to his personal worth and not for his color."<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Oberlin's

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<sup>57</sup> Coppin, *Reminiscences*, 12, 19. Despite a resolution by the board of trustees in 1853 that "in the choice of Professors and teachers of all grades we are governed by intrinsic merit irrespective of color," there was not an African American faculty member at Oberlin College until 1948. See Juanita D. Fletcher, "Against the Consensus: Oberlin College and the Education of American Negroes, 1835-1865," Ph. D. dissertation, The American University, 1974, 216.

<sup>58</sup> *Cleveland True Democrat*, n.d., in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, June 3, 1852.

racial relations seemed to prove that, as one alumnus declared, African Americans and whites could truly live “cheek by jowl” in freedom and equality if simply given the chance.<sup>59</sup>

### ***“THE WORK OF FEMALE EDUCATION”***

Women were also welcome to enroll at the Oberlin Institute and claim their own privileged place among Christian Americans. In the first college circular, Shipherd announced that one of the primary goals of the Oberlin Institute was “the elevation of the female character, bringing within the reach of the misjudged and neglected sex, all the instructive privileges which hitherto have unreasonably distinguished the leading sex from theirs.”<sup>60</sup> Just what Shipherd meant by “all instructional privileges” remained unclear. Philo P. Stewart, Shipherd’s earliest Oberlin associate, wrote to college secretary Levi Burnell in 1837 that not only was women’s education vitally important for the success of the Oberlin enterprise, but it was also crucial for the health of the nation. “The work of female education must be carried out in some form,” he wrote, “and in a much more efficient manner than it has been hitherto, or our country will go to destruction.”<sup>61</sup> The Oberlin founders intended to provide a measure of fair play in the education of America’s women.

Professor James H. Fairchild frequently advocated the Oberlin coeducational experiment, and his views are instructive in attempting to pinpoint the intentions of the founders with regards to women. His two main arguments in support of Oberlin’s course were that society had a sacred obligation to educate its women as the full

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<sup>59</sup> Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 290-291.

<sup>60</sup> *Circular, Oberlin Collegiate Institute*, March 8, 1834, RG 30/24, FP, Box 12, Folder 14; Hosford, *Father Shipherd’s Magna Charta*, 31; Geary, *Balanced in the Wind*, 38; See also *The First Annual Report of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute* (Elyria, 1834), 2, 6-7.

<sup>61</sup> Philo P. Stewart to Levi Burrell, April 10, 1837, Oberlin Collegiate Institute Letters Received, Microfilm Roll 4, OCA; Hosford, *Father Shipherd’s Magna Charta*, 31.

human beings that they were, and that they would ultimately be a “civilizing influence” on Oberlin men, well-preparing them for their public ministerial lives after graduation.<sup>62</sup> Fairchild presented the Oberlin position that in a coeducational environment, the “animal man” was kept subordinate in the presence of “these higher beings.” Fairchild believed coeducation to be the most efficient way to make men out of boys and “gentlemen of rowdies.” “It must be a very poor specimen of masculine human nature that is not helped by the association,” Fairchild declared, “and a very poor specimen of a woman that does not prove a helper.”<sup>63</sup>

As part of his lectures on pastoral theology, Charles Grandison Finney encouraged his students to find a suitable helpmeet toward the end of their academic careers. He warned that “An unmarried minister is a peculiar temptation to the other sex.” Accordingly, “ministers need a wife more than other men.” Yet a man’s choice of a wife was as important as choosing to marry in the first place. Here is where the existence of a large educated and evangelically trained female population served its graduating men most tangibly. Finney warned that “when a man is tied up to a bad wife...he had better get out of the ministry.”<sup>64</sup> To avoid such a terrible fate, the Ladies’ Board regularly drilled its female students in the proper “departments” of wife-hood. Ladies’ principal Alice Welch Cowles taught her charges that they should

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<sup>62</sup> James H. Fairchild, “Coeducation of the Sexes: An Address Before the College Presidents at Springfield, Ill.,” in *American Pedagogy: Education, the School, and the Teacher*, in *American Literature*, ed. Henry Barnard (Hartford, 1876), 390-391; James H. Fairchild, *The Joint Education of the Sexes: A Report Presented at a Meeting of the Ohio State Teachers’ Association, Sandusky City, July 8<sup>th</sup>* (Oberlin, 1852), 28-30; Asa Mahan, *Autobiography: Intellectual, Moral, and Spiritual* (1882) (Naples, FL, 2005), 183; See also *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 5, 1857. Male students agreed with the potential for a “civilizing influence.” See E.W. Gray to Asa Mahan, December 23, 1843, RG 30/24, FP, Box 14, Folder 1, OCA; *Religious Intelligence and New Haven Journal*, October 1, 1836; *New York Evangelist*, October 1, 1836.

<sup>63</sup> Fairchild, “Coeducation of the Sexes,” 390-391, 394-395; Trustee Minutes, March 9, 1836, RG 30/24, FP, Box 15, Folder 7, OCA; See also *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 5, 1857; See also Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, 1996), 192.

<sup>64</sup> Hogeland, “Coeducation of the Sexes,” 166; Robert S. Fletcher, “The Pastoral Theology of Charles G. Finney,” *Ohio Presbyterian Historical Society Proceedings*, Vol. III (June, 1941), 30.

be “a help-meet for her husband, and besides this exert an independent influence.”<sup>65</sup> In another lecture, Cowles laid out a wife’s responsibilities as “Companion. *Help meet Obey.*”<sup>66</sup> Tellingly, each year immediately after Commencement, the *Oberlin Evangelist* usually carried a long list of the weddings of embryo “Reverends” to Oberlin educated wives.<sup>67</sup>

However, women studying at the Oberlin Institute did not limit themselves to training as adjuncts to future husbands’ utopian dreams. Perhaps their greatest contribution to the perfectionist and utopian mission of the Oberlin community was their active involvement in the abolitionist movement. Many Oberlin ladies arrived with a solid abolitionist background, and these women were instrumental in shaping the antislavery ideology of the other female students. For instance, Betsey Mix Cowles had spent many of her pre-Oberlin years working on behalf of antislavery through the Ashtabula Female Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>68</sup> Lucy Stone was an ardent Garrisonian by the time she enrolled at Oberlin. She kept a picture of Garrison in her room throughout her Oberlin tenure and promoted the *Liberator* and other antislavery periodicals on campus.<sup>69</sup> Others arrived in Oberlin with unimpeachable abolitionist pedigrees. Sallie Holley’s father, New York abolitionist Myron Holley, had been a founder of the antislavery Liberty Party in 1839. Francis Russwurm’s father John B. Russwurm was the abolitionist editor of *Freedom’s Journal*, the first African

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<sup>65</sup> Alice W. Cowles, “How Shall we Attain that Elevation of Character which originally Belonged to Woman?,” n.d., RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 17, OCA.

<sup>66</sup> Alice W. Cowles, “Remedy for Impurity,” n.d., RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 17, OCA.

<sup>67</sup> Between 1837 and 1846, 97.5 percent of Oberlin’s female graduates married, and 65 percent of these married Oberlin men. Louis Hartson, “Marriage record of Alumnae for the First Century of a Coeducational College,” *The Journal of Heredity*, Vol.XXXI (September, 1940), 406; Trustee Minutes, March 9, 1836, RG 30/24, FP, Box 15, Folder 7, OCA; See also Fairchild, “Coeducation of the Sexes,” 396; Henry Cowles, Amasa Walker, Mrs. Asa Mahan, “Report on Educating the Sexes Together,” August, 1845, Board of Trustees, RG 1/3/1, Box 1, Document File 1, OCA; Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney*, 192.

<sup>68</sup> See Betsey Mix Cowles Alumni records File, OCA.

<sup>69</sup> Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney*, 269-70.; Lucy Stone to “Dear Mother and Father,” 1845, RG 21, II, Box 2, A, OCA.

American owned and operated newspaper in the United States.<sup>70</sup> Rosetta Douglass was the daughter of Frederick Douglass, and had assisted his abolitionist efforts at home and at the offices of the *North Star* before she enrolled at Oberlin.<sup>71</sup>



**Illustration 3.2: Lucy Stone**  
(from *Illustrated News*, May 28, 1853)

Perhaps one reason for the extra zeal and effectiveness of the Oberlin ladies in their antislavery efforts came from their intimate contact with former slaves. Many members of female groups like the Young Ladies' Literary Society and the Oberlin Female Moral Reform Society were positioned in ways that allowed them unique and

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<sup>70</sup> Lawson and Merrill, "The Antebellum Talented Thousandth," 145; "Russwurm," Lawson and Merrill papers, Box 3, OCA.

<sup>71</sup> See Rosetta M. Douglass Alumni Records File, OCA; Lawson and Merrill, "The Antebellum Talented Thousandth," 145.

direct access to men and women born into slavery. Their empathetic responses were telling. The Y.L.L.S. held its first meetings in the home of a former slave, the mother of one of Lucy Stone's pupils.<sup>72</sup> Stone was also a teacher in the Oberlin Liberty School, established in 1844 as a separate entity to replace the "common school department" of the Oberlin Institute for the elementary education of Black adults, most of whom had begun their lives in bondage.<sup>73</sup> In addition to the O.F.M.R.S and the Y.L.L.S., the Oberlin Maternal Association and the Oberlin Female Anti-Slavery Society demonstrated their keen empathy with the persecuted slave by going to great lengths to assist self-emancipating slaves who passed through their town on their way to freedom.<sup>74</sup>

Since it was the only American college open to females for several years, many Oberlin Institute ladies had been born in or spent considerable amounts of time living in the Southern states. Indeed, many of the Oberlin women had themselves been enslaved as children. Antoinette Brown Blackwell remembered one of her classmates who had arrived in America onboard a slave ship. Though she had been rescued from bondage and was receiving a college education, she often rose at

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<sup>72</sup> Kerr, *Lucy Stone*, 37.; Antoinette Brown Blackwell, "Reminiscences of Early Oberlin," MS, February 1918, Antoinette Brown Blackwell (Mrs. Samuel Charles Blackwell) Alumni Records File, OCA.; Antoinette Brown Blackwell, *Antoinette Brown Blackwell: The First Woman Minister*, ed. Mrs. Claude U. Gilson, MS, p.5, RG 30/24, Box 4, Folder 3, OCA.

<sup>73</sup> Lucy Stone to Francis Stone and Harriet Stone, February 15, 1846, RG 30/24, Box 10, Folder 2, OCA.; Kerr, *Lucy Stone*, 33-37.; Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 110; "Expenses of Teaching in the various Departments of the Oberlin Collegiate Institution for the Year 1844-1845," Lucy Stone Alumni Records File, OCA.

<sup>74</sup> E.C. Johnson to "Dear Sisters" at the *Advocate & Family Guardian*, June 15, 1855, RG 30/24, FP, Box 16, Folder 1, OCA; "Report of the Female Anti-Slavery Society," *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 15, 1855; "Annual Report of the L.L.S.," *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 15, 1855; Oberlin ladies' empathy for the slave woman was sometimes stretched to awkward extremes. In 1836, a white female student arrayed herself in blackface "with smoked cork" and "succeeded in making herself look exactly like a black slave." Alice Cowles recalled that the sight "was repugnant to my feelings; but I feared most, lest it should promote the same feelings of disgust in those around us, who wish to bring [Oberlin's] principles into disrepute." She told the ladies that it was "contrary to my views of good taste for young ladies to appear in any coloring, except what nature had given them." Other witnesses thought that "it would make a more vivid impression of the condition of the slave, there was nothing exceptional in it." After being put to a vote, the group decided "to have the slave exhibit herself as colored." Alice Welch Cowles to Henry Cowles, January 16, 1836, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 18, OCA.

Y.L.L.S. meetings to discuss the horrors of slavery: “My people, my poor people” was her poignant refrain.<sup>75</sup> These connections undoubtedly played a crucial role in the Y.L.L.S. decision to empty their “budget box” to needy “fugitives” when they came through Oberlin.<sup>76</sup>

African Americans were particularly important in the aggressive stance of Oberlin’s female abolitionists as well as their ability to impress their audiences in their antislavery arguments. Black women were some of the most thoroughly educated in the Oberlin collegiate department. Unlike their white classmates, they came less from rural areas in upper New York and Ohio and more from cities like New York City, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Washington, D.C., Cleveland, and Louisville. Many were educated at some of the best private Black preparatory schools in the North. These well-educated Black women were able to bring more articulate arguments against the peculiar institution, and their often times intimate connections with slavery, themselves often just a generation removed from bonds, allowed them to strike at both the core of pro-slavery beliefs and into the hearts of ambivalent listeners like few others could.

One of these Northern-educated African American females was Lucy A. Stanton, the first Black woman to complete a four-year college course in the United States, graduating with a Literary Degree in 1850. Though born free in Cleveland, Stanton was never far removed from the specter of slavery, and her graduation essay “A Plea for the Oppressed” is one of the most passionate addresses offered by an Oberlin woman in the cause of antislavery.<sup>77</sup> Stanton began her “Plea” by vowing “When I forget you, Oh my people, may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,

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<sup>75</sup> Antoinette Brown Blackwell (Mrs. Samuel Charles Blackwell) Alumni Records File, Folder 1, OCA.

<sup>76</sup> “Annual Report of the L.L.S.,” *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 15, 1855.

<sup>77</sup> Lucy A. Stanton, “A Plea for the Oppressed,” *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 17, 1850; Lucy Ann Stanton Alumni Records File, OCA.

and may my right hand forget her cunning!” Slavery to her was the greatest of all evils, “the combination of all crime.” It was not just unfairness, not just theft. “It is war,” she declared, and the people who robbed others of their freedom were no different from those who would strike them down “upon the bloody field.” Just as statesmen were to use their positions to avoid war when possible and end it when necessary, Stanton urged them to “speak the truth boldly” and take whatever measures necessary to end the oppression of so many of their constituents. They should not fear the loss of property or reputation, but rather welcome the “higher honor” of recording their names as leaders against oppression rather than followers of party distinction.<sup>78</sup>

Still, the most touching parts of her essay were her identifications with the enslaved: the horrors of a slave mother sold away from her children, the terror of a sexually violated slave girl, and the numbness of the same girl after she had been splattered with the blood of her brother, shed by the master’s hand as he tried to protect her dignity. Yet Stanton’s plea was not the lament of a defeated race. Her address ended with the expectation of deliverance, sure and soon. Hers was a promise, shared by all the Oberlin ladies who concurred in her address, to do all in their power to bring about complete emancipation. That done, it would not be long before “the shout of joy gushes from the heart of earth’s freed millions!” “How sweet,” she wrote, “how majestic...float those deep inspiring sounds over the ocean of space! Softened and mellowed they reach earth, filing the soul with harmony, and breathing of God—of love—and of universal freedom.” Despite the fact that applause had been discouraged at the ceremony, the crowd roared its approval at the close of Stanton’s address.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> See RG 14, Series 15, Box 1, Commencement Files, File “1850,” OCA; *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 17, 1850.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.* Stanton would go on to marry Oberlin graduate William Howard Day and assist him in the publication of his newspaper *The Alienated American*, which often included in its columns female correspondents.



Oberlin women were also conspicuous in the town's annual First of August celebrations, observed each year to mark the anniversary of British West Indian Emancipation of 1833 and as an alternative to an often hypocritical (from the standpoint of abolitionists) July fourth holiday. The day's festivities were planned by the town's African American leaders, and the proceedings were very often a chance for Black leaders and Oberlin ladies to demonstrate their "reciprocal supportive relationships" that they had developed in their close connections over the years.<sup>80</sup> It was clear to the young organizers that some of the most zealous advocates of the African American cause in Oberlin were, in fact, those women who were busy breaking the traditional mold of the woman's sphere in the cause of the slave. Thus convinced, Black leaders like William Howard Day and Daniel Seales extended invitations to Oberlin ladies including Lucy Stone, Antionette L. Brown, Emiline Crooker, and Mary Crabb to address the First of August crowds on relevant topics. On platforms that sometimes included only a single white male participant, multiple white and Black Oberlin women passionately spoke out against the iniquities of American bondage.<sup>81</sup>

One such occasion was Lucy Stone's first public address. Leading up to the event, the notion of the gravity of what she was about to do set in. Here she was, a woman, and she was soon to speak publicly on one of the most explosive political issues of the day. Her "siege of terrible headaches" betrayed her trepidation, yet when

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<sup>80</sup> Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 110; Kerr, *Lucy Stone*, 37-38.

<sup>81</sup> Lucy Stone to "Dear Father and Mother," August 16, 1846, RG 30/24, FP, Box 10, Folder 2, OCA; Antoinette Brown Blackwell, "Reminiscences of Early Oberlin," alumni records file, OCA; *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 17, 1844, August 19, 1846; Program of First of August Celebration, 1846, RG21, XI, Box 2, OCA; Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 95, 110; Kerr, *Lucy Stone*, 37-38; "Celebration by 'The Disfranchised Americans of Oberlin, Ohio,'" August 1, 1846, RG 30/24, FP, Box 10, Folder 1, OCA; Oberlin ladies also participated in West Indian Independence Celebrations in neighboring towns. See Holley, *A Life for Liberty*, 60-61.

the time came for Stone to address the massive crowd, she did so with a powerful command and confidence that impressed many in her audience.<sup>82</sup>

Her speech was a prospectus of her abolitionist efforts to come, if a bit melodramatic and naive. She pointed out that a “rectified public sentiment” must be the primary remedy for evil. She further noted that it did not matter that “the strong arm of the law may be around systems of wrong, nor though they may be as hoary with age as guilt. Let but the indignant frown of a virtuous public be concentrated upon them, and they must inevitably perish.” She concluded her first public speech by comparing West Indian emancipation to Christ’s resurrection.<sup>83</sup>

A Cleveland newspaperman in the audience was especially impressed. Stone’s speech, he wrote later, “gave evidence that a mind naturally brilliant had not been dimmed, but polished rather,” by her Oberlin education. He recognized her as “one of those who believe that neither color nor sex should deprive of equal rights, and true to her principles, she ascended the stand and in a clear full tone read her own article.”<sup>84</sup>

### ***“THAT MENTAL AND MANUAL TOIL”***

For all Oberlin students—black and white, male and female—the Institute’s manual labor system best exemplifies the convergence of the community’s utopian ideas. This ultimate leveling experience instilled respect for all classes of people, reverence for the opposite sex, appreciation of all races, and empathy with those in bonds.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, Oberlin required *all* of its students to work as many as four hours

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<sup>82</sup> Lucy Stone to “Dear Father and Mother,” August 16, 1846, RG 30/24, Box 10, Folder 2, OCA.

<sup>83</sup> Lucy Stone, “Why Do We Rejoice Today?” August 1, 1846, RG 30/24, FP, Box 10, Folder 1, OCA.

<sup>84</sup> Lucy Stone clipped the article and included it in a subsequent letter to her parents. “Now,” she wrote, “don’t think that I am silly because I have copied the above...I know that father used to say that his mother said, ‘You can tell your mother anything.’ So I can tell my father and mother anything, but they need not tell of it.”; Program of First of August Celebration, 1846, RG21, XI, Box 2, OCA.; Lucy Stone to “Dear Father and Mother,” August 16, 1846, RG 30/24, FP, Box 10, Folder 2, OCA.

<sup>85</sup> Indeed, Paul Goodman credits the manual labor experiments in early antebellum America with being the “origins of abolitionism.” Though he discounts the evangelical origins of the abolitionist movement and mistakes manual labor as the origin rather than manifestation of the abolitionist impulse, the

a day at manual labor, so those who would avoid its results must necessarily avoid Oberlin altogether.<sup>86</sup> “If a student will not work and study,” Shipherd wrote, “he leaves Oberlin.”<sup>87</sup> The founder stressed the vital importance of Oberlin’s manual labor program in the college’s report of 1834. It was considered indispensable to a complete education, since it leveled the students, “all of both sexes, rich and poor,” preserved their health, promoted clear and strong thought, allowed some pecuniary advantage, formed habits of industry and economy, and established in all students a familiarity and respect for “common things.”<sup>88</sup>

Administrators procured an eight hundred acre “farm” to employ the labor of its students. This in itself initially provided all the working effort that students could offer since only about 1/16 of the land was ready for farming. Around fifty acres of the eight hundred was cleared and under cultivation, and many students undertook the heavy toil of felling trees and clearing land. As pasture expanded, the school obtained cattle, pigs, sheep, and teams of mules and oxen to provide both sustenance and jobs for the students.<sup>89</sup>

Early settlers remarked on the activity and efficiency of the student laborers. Marianne Dascomb, who would serve the Oberlin Institute as the principle of the ladies’ board, wrote to a friend that “Things about us are going on so briskly *one* cannot well feel *sleepy*. You hear great trees falling, see fires blazing, & new houses

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importance he places upon manual labor is warranted. Paul Goodman, “The Manual Labor Movement and the Origins of Abolitionism,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 13 (Fall, 1993), 355-388.

<sup>86</sup> “By Laws of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute,” n.d. (1835?), p.4, RG 30/24, FP, Box 11, Folder 6, OCA. As college labor became scarcer, Oberlin gradually decreased the official manual labor requirement, yet work was always available to students in the community. In some form, Oberlin’s manual labor department survived into the 1850s, and its institutional seal still bears the slogan “Learning and Labor,” encircling both a school building and planted field of grain. See Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 186-195; “Seal of Oberlin College,” *Oberlin Alumni Magazine* 7 (July 1911), 353.

<sup>87</sup> *Catalog of the Trustees, Officers, and Students of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute, Together with the Second Annual Report* (Oberlin, 1835), 20.

<sup>88</sup> *The First Annual Report of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute, November, 1834* (Elyria, 1834), 6-7; Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 187.

<sup>89</sup> John J. Shipherd, “Rules for Cutting Cord Wood on the Institution Farm,” n.d., RG 30/24, FP, Box 15, Folder 6, OCA; *First Annual Report*, 6-7.

going up in all directions.”<sup>90</sup> John J. Shipherd described the scene five minutes after the morning manual labor bell rang: “the hammers, saws, etc., of the mechanical students wake all around us, and the axe-men in the woods breaking the ‘ribs of nature’ make all crack.”<sup>91</sup> Indeed, Shipherd made it clear that only students with initiative need apply. The first annual report warned that no new students were “desired but those who are willing to endure that mental and manual toil, through which alone qualifications are obtained for the most extensive usefulness. Drones cannot be endured in this hive of activity.”<sup>92</sup>

Oberlin’s female students were not excepted. Young ladies were to “perform the labor of the Steward’s Department, together with the washing, ironing, and much of the sewing for the students.”<sup>93</sup> Oberlin men sent their mending and washing to the steward, paid by the piece, and the steward then distributed the washing and mending to the young ladies who were paid to do the work.<sup>94</sup> Lucy Stone remembered that Mondays were set aside for the female students to do wash and repair the clothing of “the leading sex.”<sup>95</sup> Though this was not a revolutionary leap from the “domestic sphere,” this practice produced what historian Robert Fletcher calls “economic dependence of the sexes,” and it did allow men and women easier access to college by cheapening the cost for both.<sup>96</sup> Young men received between four and eight cents an

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<sup>90</sup> Marianne P. Dascomb to Daniel Parker, May 24, 1834, in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, “Appendix,” 329-333.

<sup>91</sup> John J. Shipherd to “Dearest of Parents,” December 13, 1833, in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, “Appendix,” 326-328; See also Faculty Records, Minutes, February 26, 1836, June 14, 1836, Microfilm, OCA.

<sup>92</sup> *First Annual Report*, 6.

<sup>93</sup> *Catalog of the Trustees, Officers, and Students of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute (1835)*, 20.

<sup>94</sup> Warren W. Warner to Hannah Warner, December 25, 1841, RG 30/24, FP, Box 3, Folder 25, OCA.

<sup>95</sup> Circular, Oberlin Collegiate Institute, March 8, 1834, RG 30/24, FP, Box 12, Folder 14; Lucy Stone, “The Progress of Fifty Years,” in *The Congress of Women, Held in the Woman’s Building, World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, U.S.A., 1893*, ed. Mary Cavanaugh Oldham Eagle, Vol.I (Chicago, 1894), 58; Ronald W. Hogeland, “Coeducation of the Sexes at Oberlin College: A Study of Social Ideas in Mid-Nineteenth Century America,” *The Journal of Social History*, Vol.6, No.2 (Winter, 1972), 167-168; See also Alice Welch Cowles Notebook Number 1, 30, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 16, OCA.

<sup>96</sup> *New York Evangelist*, October 1, 1836; Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 187-188; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 640. However, an official and consistent gendered division of labor never came about in Oberlin. Men also were known to labor at domestic pursuits. For instance, future Civil War general, Ohio governor, United States Senator, Secretary of the Interior, and Finney son in law Jacob Dolson

hour, and women received from three to four cents. Though not equal, Oberlin compensated its young ladies by offering them tuition at twelve dollars a year as opposed to fifteen for young men.<sup>97</sup>

Oberlin had not been alone among American schools in experimenting with a system of manual labor. Lane Theological Seminary had incorporated manual labor into its curriculum, and its student body was made up of a large number of Oneida Institute alumni, a school founded on manual labor principles by Finney's mentor George Washington Gale. Both institutions had admitted African Americans. However, by the mid 1830s, what has been described as a "manual labor boom" in American schools had slowed to almost nothing.<sup>98</sup> For most, the benefits of manual labor and study simply did not outweigh the costs. In the volatile economic environment of the late 1830s, most schools were not willing to pay more for farms, workshops, etc., than they were able to bring in in profit. If that meant that some students could not afford a formal education, so be it. One by one, manual labor institutions like Andover, Knox, and Denison dropped the department from their operational plans.<sup>99</sup>

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Cox often worked "with paper cap on his head, with apron and sleeves rolled up, mak[ing] the crackers which, on Sunday mornings, with coffee, made the breakfast." Lori Ginzberg, "'The Joint Education of the Sexes': Oberlin's Original Vision," in *Educating men and Women Together: Coeducation in a Changing World*, ed. Carol Lasser (Urbana, 1987), 71. See also *Oberliniana: A Jubilee Volume of Semi-Historical Anecdotes Connected with the Past and Present of Oberlin College*, ed. A.L. Shumway and C. DeW. Brower (Cleveland, 1883), 88-89.

<sup>97</sup> Prudential Committee Records, July 24, 1835, July 28, 1835, RG 30/24, FP, Box 13, Folder 4, OCA; Elam Jewet Comings Diary, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 10, OCA; Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 187-188; Kerr, *Lucy Stone*, 32-33.

<sup>98</sup> The Society for Promoting Manual Labor in Literary Institutions, on whose behalf Theodore Dwight Weld labored from 1831-1832, made no efforts after 1832 to carry out the objects of its founding. *The American Journal of Education*, Vol.XV, No.XXXIX (June, 1865), 232-234; Goodman, "The Manual Labor Movement," 364.

<sup>99</sup> *The Quarterly Register*, Vol.VIII, No.3 (February, 1836), 269-276; Charles B. Haddock, "Manual Labor Institutions: Addressed to the New Hampshire Education Society, at Keene, September 11, 1833," in *Addresses and Miscellaneous Writings* (Cambridge, 1846), 220-236; Ellwood P. Coverley, *Public Education in the United States* (Boston, 1919), 279-281; Goodman, *Of One Blood*, 139-160.

The Oberlin community, however, refused to consider manual labor as a simple balance sheet. Their system embodied everything that Oberlin stood for, and Shipherd early on equated the survival of the community's and institution's basic ideologies with the health of its college labor system.<sup>100</sup> As the rest of the country moved beyond the fad of manual laborism, Oberlin's stubborn adherence to the system demonstrated its continually increasing rejection of the social order on the outside. On an even more practical level, Oberlin's manual labor system and the formation of an agricultural society in 1837 was thought necessary to some to ensure that the community could feed itself if they were unable to supply themselves from the hostile outside world.<sup>101</sup>

Oberlin's system was far from profitable. After the initial flurry of work offered by the clearing of virgin forest, it was often difficult to find enough labor to occupy students' quotas.<sup>102</sup> Even then, as Professor James Fairchild noted, if the student were paid by the hour at the lowest possible rate, the college would have little or nothing to show for its investment. Because of its attention to the mode of production rather than the product itself, Fairchild estimated that every good produced cost twice its market value. Only "inexhaustible resources" on the institute's part could hope to support the system without somewhat damaging the school's fiscal conditions.<sup>103</sup> Still, Fairchild reported that continuing efforts were made to secure suitable labor for students, including the 1836 attempt at silk cultivation. Then, the

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<sup>100</sup> *Catalog of the Trustees, Officers, and Students of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute (1835)*, 20.

<sup>101</sup> See James Prudden to George Prudden, May 23, 1837, RG 30/205, Prudden family papers, Box 1, OCA.

<sup>102</sup> Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 189. As a result, the four hours' requirement was gradually lessened to suit the demand.

<sup>103</sup> Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 187-191.

entire male student body was employed for a full week to plant a large grove of mulberry trees, yet the venture never produced a single silk cocoon.<sup>104</sup>

However, profit was not the main point of this type of manual labor system. The main design of the Oberlin Institute's manual labor system was not economic, though the diminishing of expense was an object of it. Rather, as Weld put it, the "grand design of the system" was to enable the student "to expand his views, to elevate his aims, to ennoble his purposes."<sup>105</sup> Professor Henry Cowles agreed that these qualities caused God to "*smile on the enterprise*," since the system, as Oberlin and Weld understood it, met the most pressing "*wants of the age*."<sup>106</sup>

The practical effect of Oberlin's manual labor system was to eliminate the gap between the developing white and blue collar classes which was obtaining in American society as a whole. The haves and the have nots outside of Oberlin were increasingly classified by their proximity to physical toil. Elites North and South did not dirty their hands in manual drudgery. Lower class whites, free Blacks, and slaves were those whose livelihoods were demanded by the sweat of their brows. To be sure, bourgeois culture in the North gave lip service to their commitment to and respect for free white labor, but in reality it had become an adjunct of the American Dream to move as far beyond the toiling masses as one could on one's way to wealth.<sup>107</sup> At the Oberlin Institute, however, regulations requiring manual labor applied equally to scions of wealthy Southern planters, daughters of Northern merchants, and former slaves. Even the faculty and president did their share of labor for Oberlin when

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<sup>104</sup> Prudential Committee Records, May 30, 1836, RG 30/24, FP, Box 13, Folder 4, OCA; Faculty Records, Minutes, July 16, 1836, microfilm, OCA; James Harris Fairchild, *Oberlin: Its Origins, Progress, and Results. An Address, Prepared for the Alumni of Oberlin College, Assembled August 22, 1860* (Oberlin, 1860), 45; Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 190.

<sup>105</sup> Weld, *First Annual Report*, 93-94.

<sup>106</sup> Henry Cowles, "Manual Labor with Study: Address of Henry Cowles Before the Oberlin Agricultural Society," *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 13, 1846.

<sup>107</sup> See Goodman, *Of One Blood*, 276.

needed.<sup>108</sup> One observer in 1849 recognized President Asa Mahan “setting the example in this particular.” As Mahan’s work wagon passed the college buildings on the way to the institute’s farm, he had “his coat off, holding the reins in one hand and a hoe in the other with a negro sitting on each side of him, and two white men behind.”<sup>109</sup>

This was a radical departure from the operations of most American colleges at the time. Weld noted that the annual expenses of most colleges put higher education out of the reach of “nineteen twentieths of our population.” The result of such an imbalance was both frightful and unethical:

as knowledge is power, the sons of the rich, by enjoying the advantages for the acquisition of this power vastly superior to others, may secure to themselves a monopoly of those honors and emoluments which are conferred upon the well-educated. In this way society is divided into *castes*. The laboring classes become hewers of wood and drawers of water for the educated. The two parties stand wide asunder, no bond of companionship uniting them, no mutual sympathies incorporating them into one mass, no equality of privileges striking a common level for both.<sup>110</sup>

Since labor was required, the more affluent students had no choice but to work side by side with the poorest of students who depended on their manual labor earnings to fund their education. One early visitor to Oberlin described it as “emphatically a

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<sup>108</sup> Asa Mahan often helped the students in their manual labor, “especially when any ‘dirty work’ was to be done. No apology was ever made. Its necessity made every form of labor honorable.” One witness of such faculty / student collaboration remarked that it “appear[ed] like primitive Christianity revived.” Finney also trained his theologists to “Avoid fastidiousness about soiling your hands among the laborers. Mahan, *Autobiography*, 273-275; E.J. Comings, “Notes on Finney’s Lectures on Pastoral Theology,” July, 1837, MS, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 10, OCA; Madden and Hamilton, *Freedom and Grace*, 69.

<sup>109</sup> *New Haven Palladium*, in *New Bedford Daily Mercury*, April 4, 1849.

<sup>110</sup> Weld, *First Annual Report*, 40-42.



PEOPLE'S COLLEGE" since "Its whole arrangements and economy are such, that any and every young man who possesses industrious habits and a thirst for knowledge, can have that thirst gratified...where he is not made to feel that *poverty* and *labor* are disgrace...each one is made to feel that *labor is honorable*, and *idleness a disgrace*, to the rich as well as the poor."<sup>111</sup>

Of course, the common brotherhood encouraged by Oberlin's manual labor system included African Americans, who had become the innocent victims of the racist connections between labor, race, and servility. The circular supporting logic for this view was best articulated in the 1850s by Senator James Henry Hammond of South Carolina and Virginia's George Fitzhugh. In his infamous "mudsill" theory, Hammond summarized the longstanding Southern mindset which held that there was, and always had been, a lower, "mudsill" class for the upper classes to rest upon. These most degraded workers performed the menial work that allowed the higher classes to properly advance civilization. In America, this drew a sharp line between the slaves (and by extension all African Americans) who "required a low order of intellect and but little skill" in performing the most laborious manual labor, and those who, in their rightful and natural exemption from labor, managed them and pursued more "civilized" pursuits with their time.<sup>112</sup>

Especially in Ohio and other free states where the existence of slavery did not create an automatic division between such "honorable" and "dishonorable" labor, the desire to remove one's self as far as possible from drudgery and the stigma of slavery was strong.<sup>113</sup> The pattern established in the South where African Americans did the work nobody else would do and every white man sought to be the oppressor of the one

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<sup>111</sup> *The Ohio Cultivator*, September 14, 1847.

<sup>112</sup> James Henry Hammond, "'Mudsill' Speech," in *Slavery Defended: in the Views of the Old South*, ed. Eric L. McKittrick (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1963), 121-125; Frank Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War* (Charlottesville, 2004), 15.

<sup>113</sup> See Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1976).

beneath him was easily transferable to the North.<sup>114</sup> It did not help that Hammond and other proslavery spokesmen described Northern white wage workers as barely distinguishable from slaves.<sup>115</sup>

To Henry Cowles and others at the Oberlin Institute, this type of equation was “one of the giant evils of the civilized world,” and any sensible student of history could notice that maxim “written out in sunbeams.” The contempt shown towards labor and the laboring classes “abstracted from the race the spirit of selfishness to reign rampant over human hearts!” In fact, Cowles argued that the very essence of slavery was an “anti-labor aristocratic spirit.” It would be “a rank absurdity,” he said, to educate young republicans in such a manner as to leave that spirit intact, then to hope to “set them to redeem society in our age from the crushing evils of oppression.”<sup>116</sup>

The Oberlin community’s utopian system was the antidote. It brought students together as equals and instilled in them the values necessary to succeed while loving one’s neighbor in the process. Consider the example of just two students, one Black, one white, from a single academic year, 1846. The first was the son of a slave in Virginia, and it was no secret that his father was also his mother’s white master. The second had been born in Montreal, but grew up in New York City. His father was a respected shipbuilder, and his mother traced her lineage to the original Pilgrims of 1620. Their life paths were brought together in Oberlin.

That year, there were 492 students enrolled at Oberlin, so it is almost certain that the young men, the first named John and the second Jacob, studied together, ate

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<sup>114</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, quoted in John DeWitt, *Early Globalization and the Economic Development of the United States and Brazil* (Westport, CT, 2002), 51.

<sup>115</sup> James Henry Hammond, “Speech on the Admission of Kansas Under the Lecompton Constitution, Delivered in the Senate of the United States March 4, 1858,” in James Henry Hammond, *Selections from the Letters and Speeches of the Hon. James H. Hammond, of South Carolina* (New York, 1866), 301-322.

<sup>116</sup> Cowles, “Manual Labor with Study,” *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 13, 1846.

together, labored together, and worshipped together in an environment that never allowed either to underestimate his own potential or duties, nor to underestimate those of his fellow students. Seventeen years later, in 1863, it should come as no surprise to find John Mercer Langston, now a respected lawyer and one of the most prominent African American abolitionists in the Union, recruiting Black soldiers for the federal army, and Jacob Dolson Cox, once a radical Ohio Senator and current Union General, leading African American soldiers in the field in the great battle for liberty.

Early Oberlin's utopian society created men and women bound by a perfectionist faith to make bare the faults of the world and do whatever it took to correct them. Their neighbors were their brothers and sisters, and their basic rule was the golden one. Consider the "Oberlin doctrine" as set out in 1839 by Finney, Mahan, and J.P. Cowles. To the question "Why ought I love my neighbor?" Mahan answered "Because I perceive intuitively that it is right." Cowles thought to add that it was because "my love will be useful to my neighbor." Finney encapsulated both answers in the comprehensive theory that all moral beings intuitively know their obligation to "choose the welfare of all sentient existences." Finney's answer was that "*I ought to love my neighbor because his welfare is valuable.*" Love was always both a personal feeling *as well as* a voluntary act of choice.<sup>117</sup> Each moral agent had the ethical choice between love and sin. In one way or another, this was the abolitionist chorus through Reconstruction and beyond: live the righteous life so that by your example, others may do the same until the certain commencement of the millennium.

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<sup>117</sup> Wright, "Oberlin's Contribution to Ethics," 432-434.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *“The worthies of Oberlin”: Antislavery Expansion in the Late 1830s*

The Lane Rebels were prompt in their denunciations of slavery, but took their time making their way to Oberlin in the spring of 1835. The precocious abolitionists enjoyed a celebratory parade of sorts from their base near Cincinnati to the Western Reserve, stopping along the way to help organize the state antislavery society in Putnam in late April. Those Oberlin students and residents who did not make the trek to the convention kept up a daily watch for the arrival of the new students on whom so many expectations rested. They were legendary before they even set foot in Oberlin.<sup>1</sup>

Before their classes at Oberlin began, many of the Rebels and their new professors joined the ranks of traveling lecturers for the American Anti-Slavery Society. They were some of the first into the field, constituting half of the A.A.S.S. lecturing force in 1835-1836, and eventually representing a third of all Society agents at the height of its agency system late in the decade. These abolitionists were fundamental leaders in the greatest period of growth of American abolitionism, and helped make antislavery palatable to a burgeoning abolitionist constituency.

The abolitionist efforts of these Oberlinites enhanced the community's reputation as the antislavery hub of the West. However, its distance (both spatially and ideologically) from the differences which were dividing the Eastern wing of the movement from within also placed the Oberlin community in a privileged spot nationally. Its most tangible manifestation, the Oberlin Collegiate Institute, increasingly became a symbol around which all abolitionists could rally despite their differences. Even as their own financial stability was threatened by the Panic of 1837,

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<sup>1</sup> James Dascomb to “Dear Mother,” April 7, 1835, RG 30/24, Robert S. Fletcher papers (hereafter FP), Box 5, Folder 11, Oberlin College Archives (hereafter OCA).

antislavery leaders of all backgrounds lifted up the Oberlin Institute, that “nursery for Abolitionists,” as a vital institution that could not be permitted to fail.<sup>2</sup>

### ***AN “ABOLITION SCHOOL”***

John J. Shipherd arrived back in Oberlin from New York in mid-May accompanied by prize recruit Charles Grandison Finney. Asa Mahan had resigned his Cincinnati pastorate on the first of that month, and would soon be in town as well. When everyone was finally assembled on the ground which would eventually be designated as Tappan Square, there was a great spiritual reunion. Many of those gathered on that spot could look back to the revivals of the 1820s and 1830s as an important motivating force in their lives.<sup>3</sup>

Almost immediately, Finney got up a revival that refreshed the souls of the students, and then he commended them back to their education and crusade to save the world.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Lane’s academic environment, however, there would be no separation between moral endeavors and the students’ formal scholarship. The Oberlin system was designed to enrich “the whole man” (and woman), and classes were seldom so narrow as to preclude the discussion of American slavery and abolitionism, especially since aspects of those topics could easily be brought to bear on subjects as wide ranging as political economy to moral philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, especially with

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Pease to Rachel Savoriry, n.d., (1839), RG 30/250, Marlene Dahl Merrill papers (hereafter MP), accession 1995/142, Box 1, OCA.

<sup>3</sup> Shipherd and many of the Lane Rebels had been converted in one or another of Finney’s New York revivals, as had Oberlin Institute secretary and treasurer Levi Burnell and Jabez Burrell, who would go on to organize Oberlin’s Sheffield satellite campus. Mahan and Shipherd had also been among those who assisted Finney in his revival efforts. See Robert S. Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College: From its Foundation Through the Civil War*, Vol.I, 179-186; James Dascomb to “Dear Mother,” April 7, 1835, RG 30/24, FP, Box 5, Folder 11, OCA; James Thome, “The Anti-Slavery Movement: Its Past and Present,” May 6, 1861, newspaper clipping, Lewis Tappan papers, microfilm roll 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 24, 1856; Charles Grandison Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, ed. Garth M. Rosell and Richard A.G. DuPuis (Grand Rapids, 1989), 389.

<sup>5</sup> *The Oberlin Jubilee*, 309; *Oberlin Evangelist*, March 27, 1839; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, July 9, 1864.

abolitionists like Charles Finney, Asa Mahan, Henry Cowles, John Morgan, and others leading the class discussions, it would have been difficult if not unrealistic to expect academics and abolition to remain apart. In fact, antislavery lecturers were welcomed into Oberlin Institute classrooms and encouraged to participate in the lessons. James Fairchild recalled that “It was an important part of an education to hear such a man as Theodore D. Weld in the prime of his manhood.”<sup>6</sup> Critics were not incorrect in assuming that Oberlin was an “Abolition School.”<sup>7</sup>

The foundations of both the colony and the college had been laid together in the unbroken Ohio forest in 1833, and in the early years, differentiating between the school and the community was not only nearly impossible, but for all intents and purposes at that point, unnecessary. On June 25, while the community was observing a concert of prayer on behalf of “the oppressed,” they resolved to form themselves into an antislavery society. John J. Shipherd was selected president, and remarked that the enthusiasm and unanimity of feeling shown by the society indicated that the organization “would *not* be a body without a soul.” When the call came to demonstrate their adherence to abolitionist principles, two hundred and thirty citizens and students “came up en masse, arm and soul to this good work of God.” Shipherd predicted that all those who were absent would join as soon as possible. He, Finney, and Mahan were the first to eagerly sign their names to the society constitution.<sup>8</sup>

The constitution adopted by the Oberlin society was a nearly verbatim replication of that drawn up by the Lane students the year before. The Oberlin

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<sup>6</sup> James H. Fairchild, “The True Character of Slavery, as it Existed in this Country,” n.d., RG 2/3, James H. Fairchild papers, Series 8, Box 9, OCA. The college also offered courses in comparative Bible slavery. See *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, June 3, 1852.

<sup>7</sup> *The University Quarterly*, Vol.1 (January, 1860), 181; William and Aimee Lee Cheek, *John Mercer Langston and the fight for Black Freedom, 1829-1865* (Urbana, 1989), 93.

<sup>8</sup> Not every student and colonist signed their names to the constitution. However, the absence of known abolitionists such as Edward Weed, John Keep, and Levi Burnell, among others, suggests that the absence of one’s name did not necessarily mean that one did not agree with the aims of the society or attend meetings. “Constitution of the Oberlin Anti-Slavery Society,” RG 16/5/3, Autograph File, Document 146, OCA; *Ohio Observer*, November 27, 1834.

constitution, however, prominently bore not just the names of students, but also faculty and leading townspeople among its endorsers.<sup>9</sup> The goal of the society was to be “the immediate emancipation of the whole colored race within the United States,” not only of the slave from the master, but also the emancipation of free African Americans from “the oppression of public sentiment” in the North. They sought the elevation of all of the oppressed “to an intellectual, moral, and political equality with the whites.”<sup>10</sup>

The enslaved, they wrote, had been “constituted by God a moral agent, the keeper of his own happiness, the executive of his own powers, the accountable arbiter of his own choice.” Bondage robbed slaves of his or her own self, and in so doing, earned Oberlin’s damning scorn:

... though he is immortal, created in God's image, the purchase of a Saviour's blood, visited by the Holy Ghost, and united to a citizenship with angels and to fellowship with God, it drags him to the shambles and sells him like a beast, goads him to incessant and unrequited toil, withholds from him legal protection in all his personal rights and social relations, and abandons to caprice, cupidity, passion, and lust, all that is dear in human well-being. It crushes the upward tendencies of the intellect, makes the acquisition of knowledge a crime, and consigns the mind to famine.<sup>11</sup>

To those who might dismiss slavery as a phenomenon that affected only the South, members of the society noted the effect of slavery on the entire American nation and its spiritual health. Quoting slaveholder Thomas Jefferson, they pointed

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<sup>9</sup> Some Oberlin abolitionists even signed their names more than once. See *Liberator*, April 12, 1834 for the Lane document.

<sup>10</sup> “Constitution of the Oberlin Anti-Slavery Society,” RG 16/5/3, Autograph File, Document 146, OCA.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

out that slavery “gives loose to the worst of passions” among those in direct contact with it. However, it was also opposed to “the genius of our Government,” and they denounced the institution that not only made a mockery of the United States Constitution, but also demoted the Declaration of Independence to “a rapsody [sic] of sentimentalism,” convicted Americans of hypocrisy before the world, neutralized their influence as a nation, and checked the advance of republican principles. Perhaps most ominous to members of Oberlin antislavery society was the fact that slavery represented an impediment to the conversion of the world, and was thus “a standing libel upon the avowed influence of the Christian religion.” The heathens of the world, they believed, “will not be slow to read the disgraceful commentary.”<sup>12</sup>

To keep Oberlin’s influence pure in the world’s eyes, the Oberlin church also took decisive action on the slavery question soon after the founding of the Oberlin Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>13</sup> The church body resolved that “as Slavery is a Sin no person shall be invited to preach or minister in this Church or any *Br*[other] be invited to commune who is a slave holder.”<sup>14</sup> Oberlin Institute students soon spread this spirit to other nearby churches and religious organizations. Uriah Chamberlain, as secretary of the Congregational Association of Central Ohio, proposed a resolution which would later pass “That slavery, as it exists in these United States, is a violation of all rights—

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<sup>12</sup> “Constitution of the Oberlin Anti-Slavery Society,” RG 16/5/3, Autograph File, Document 146, OCA.

<sup>13</sup> From its founding in 1834 through 1855, the “Congregational Church of Christ at Oberlin” was the only church in community. In 1855, an Episcopalian organized themselves, to be followed by a Baptist organization in 1866 and a Methodist one two years later. A second Congregational church was deemed necessary in 1866 due to the expansion of the first, but both continued to share the same sabbath school until 1868. See D.L. Leonard, “Early Annals of the Oberlin Church,” *Papers of the Ohio Church History Society*, Vol.VIII (1897), 81-110.

<sup>14</sup> Oberlin Society Records, RG 31/4/1, Box 1, OCA. The First Church in Oberlin would be a consistent voice against slavery. In 1846, the church adopted a report written by James Thome, John Morgan, James Dascomb, James Fairchild, and Timothy Hudson which declared that it would withhold all fellowship from “slaveholders or with those who lend their influence to sustain slavery.” Through the end of the Civil War, the church issued form letters to its members transferring to a different congregation which read in part, “This certificate is not intended as a recommendation to any church that sanctions or tolerates slaveholding.” *Lorain County News*, July 11, 1866.



a heinous sin against God, and ought in no instance to be tolerated [sic] by the Church of Christ.”<sup>15</sup> Oberlin theological alumnus William T. Allan contributed resolutions to the 1837 meeting of the General Association of the Western Reserve binding its members to “have no Christian communion with those who practice slavery, nor with any who justify the system.”<sup>16</sup>

By the fall of 1835, Oberlin had quickly become a major center of antislavery activity in the West. Its population represented a virtually unbroken abolitionist unit, and thus undoubtedly contained more antislavery reformers per capita than any other town in America. Almost everywhere an Oberlinite traveled in the West, the abolitionist thrust was extended and the seed of reform was planted. In order to capitalize on the growing abolitionist sentiment in the region, the American Anti-Slavery Society sought agents to secure the advancements of the nascent movement and to continue the spread of the antislavery message.<sup>17</sup> Theodore Weld, in consultation with A.A.S.S. executive secretary Elizur Wright, Jr., determined that the bustling Oberlin Institute campus was just the place to recruit the needed men. In November, Weld headed to the Western Reserve to enroll the young men Wright called the “worthies of Oberlin” as commissioned agents on behalf of the suffering slave.<sup>18</sup> Weld arrived in Oberlin from southern Ohio on the seventh of that month, and quickly went to work recruiting antislavery crusaders and winning over the hearts of a community already progressing down the path of immediatism.<sup>19</sup> His lectures “took a strong hold upon the hearts of the old and young,” James Fairchild

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<sup>15</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 12, 1839.

<sup>16</sup> Donald W. Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (New York, 1976), 41.

<sup>17</sup> Elizur Wright, Jr. to Theodore Dwight Weld, June 10, 1835, November 5, 1835, January 22, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 225-226, 240-242, 254-256.

<sup>18</sup> Elizur Wright, Jr. to Theodore Dwight Weld, July 16, 1835, *Weld Letters*, I: 227-228.

<sup>19</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, November 17, 1835, *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld, and Sarah Grimké*, Vol.I, ed. Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. DuMond (New York, 1934), 242-245.

remembered, and the subject of abolition quickly became the engrossing theme of private contemplation, public discussion, and “the burden of song and prayer.”<sup>20</sup> Over the course of the next three weeks, Weld thoroughly “abolitionized” the Oberlin community and significantly advanced the transformation that had begun just a handful of months earlier.<sup>21</sup>

Weld’s Oberlin “reform revival” was perhaps his most successful to date. For twenty one frigid nights, he lectured on abolition in one of the new buildings that had been hastily thrown up to house Oberlin’s influx of students. He wrote to Lewis Tappan that his makeshift lecture hall “was neither plastered nor lathed and the only seats are rough boards thrown upon blocks.” The dedication of the Oberlinites was staggering, though, and Weld estimated that some five or six hundred students and other community members of both sexes packed the hall every night despite the lack of functional fireplaces or sufficient chairs.<sup>22</sup> Fairchild credited Weld with illuminating that long, dark, November “with the flashes of his genius and power.”<sup>23</sup>

Somehow, Weld also found an hour or two each day to focus his most earnest efforts upon the Oberlin students who had volunteered to go out into the enemy’s camp as lecturing agents for the American Anti-Slavery Society. Samuel Gould, William T. Allan, James A. Thome, John W. Alvord, Huntington Lyman, and Sereno W. Streeter received an intensive crash course “in the principles, facts, arguments, etc., of the whole subject.” Of course, the entire process must have seemed quite familiar to them by that point, as it had only been a little over a year since Weld first began schooling them in abolitionist doctrine and methods as students at Lane Seminary. Though Weld had not enrolled at Oberlin like many of the other Rebels,

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<sup>20</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 16, 1856.

<sup>21</sup> James H. Fairchild, *Oberlin: The Colony and the College* (Oberlin, 1883), 75.

<sup>22</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, November 17, 1835, *Weld Letters*, I:242-245.

<sup>23</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 16, 1856.

and while they had been busying themselves with their educational arrangements, he had been lecturing on abolition across the region. Now, he knew better than they what worked, what did not, the best ways to win an argument, how to flee a hostile town, or safely confront a mob if their lives were in danger. As their mentor, Weld laid open “the treasures of his anti-slavery magazine” for their benefit.<sup>24</sup>

These men were to be the shock troops of a revolutionary movement, and Weld and the A.A.S.S. wanted to make sure that they received the most thorough preparation possible before they went out to face a hostile nation. When Weld wrapped up his campaign in Oberlin, these “young warriors” accompanied him to Cleveland to continue their intensive training. A sympathetic local judge opened his law office to Weld and his chosen men, and they quickly converted it into “a school of abolition.” Their coursework included “copying documents, with hints, discussions, and suggestions,” as well as practical chemistry lessons, particularly questions “related to tar and feathers, and how to erase their stain.” In this way, they passed another two weeks “in earnest and most profitable drill.”<sup>25</sup>

### ***A REVIVAL IN ABOLITIONISM***

When they finally packed their bags and officially headed out into the field as lecturers for the American Anti-Slavery Society, these Oberlin students were the most thoroughly prepared activists in the movement. Following Weld’s example, they would enter a town and seek out the local Presbygational church where they would attempt to arrange with its minister permission to hold a meeting there.<sup>26</sup> Often, the

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<sup>24</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 16, 1856.

<sup>25</sup> Huntington Lyman, “Lane Seminary Rebels,” in *The Oberlin Jubilee, 1833-1883*, ed. W.G. Ballantine (Oberlin, 1883), 67; Lyman to JT Frost, January 28, 1887, Huntington Lyman alumni records file, OCA.

<sup>26</sup> “Presbygational” churches were those under the Presbyterian-Congregationalist Plan of Union (see Chapter One). Most of these churches in Ohio, in fact, were Congregationalist, and abolitionists (especially those from Oberlin) sought them out because of they had been educated as

first assembly incited an anti-abolitionist riot, and this was so common that the lecturers gradually came to consider this a standard part of their introduction to a particular locality.

The experience of two of these Oberlin students in Middlebury, Ohio is representative. James Thome and John Alvord stopped at the Portage County town to lecture, and their account of their stay demonstrates the dangers they other abolitionists constantly faced. “Last night,” Alvord wrote a friend, “Midd[l]ebury puked...Spasmodic heavings and wretchings were manifest during the whole day. Toward night symptoms more alarming.” As Thome began his lecture that evening in the local church, all chaos broke loose:

...in came a broadside of Eggs. Eggs, Glass, Egg shells, whites and yolks flew on every side. Br. Thom[e]s Fact Book received an egg just in its bowels and I doubt whether one in the House escaped a spattering. I have been trying to clean off this morning, but cant get off the stink. Thome dodged like a stoned gander. He brought up at length against the side of the desk, cocked his eye and stood gazing upward at the flying missiles as they stream[e]d in ropy masses through the house.

I fear he’ll never stand the “*Goose Egg*” without winking.

After a temporary twenty minute lull, a crash in the rear of the church warned the beleaguered lecturers that another volley of rotten eggs was on its way. The mob

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Presbybyterians as well as for the independence individual Congregational churches had over their internal affairs. Quaker meeting houses also provided a potentially friendly hearing. National denominations like the Methodists or Baptists, because of their connections to Southern congregations which sanctioned slavery, would be more likely to close their doors to abolitionist lecturers. If given the opportunity, however, abolitionist lecturers in the mid 1830s would use whatever church buildings (or, more commonly, other structures) were offered them.

“continued the fire some time like scattering musketry, mingled with their howlings.”<sup>27</sup>

Invariably, the church would then respond by closing its doors to further agitation (and destruction), and the lecturers would move to a local store, warehouse, private home, barn, or open field (if they were not driven out of town altogether by hostile anti-abolitionists).<sup>28</sup> There, the physical opposition could be just as fierce. Weld instructed his students that at the most potentially dangerous point, when the agent actually left the lecture venue and had to face the angry mobs, that they should draw themselves up to their full height and cross their arms. His experience showed that crowds were sometimes hesitant to attack a man with arms in such a defensive position.<sup>29</sup> After two or three days of hostility, violent opposition would sometimes fizzle out, and the real process of conversion could begin.<sup>30</sup>

These young men preached the antislavery gospel as if they were leading a revival, speaking for upwards of two hours, night after night, until they won over and converted their audiences. They would not have used notes if it could be avoided, but would speak from the heart, sprinkling pithy humor within urgent seriousness. If all went well, they would win antislavery converts who would then assume the burden of converting others to abolitionism and completing the organization of local antislavery societies, while the abolitionists moved on to their next appointment and began the process anew.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> John W. Alvord to Theodore Dwight Weld, February 9, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 259-261. Thome was quick to defend his honor against his friend's chiding remarks. To Weld he wrote "I was brave as a warrior, but I did really think the stove was exploding with a tremendous force. So soon as I was undeceived, I was bold as a Lion. It was a ludicrous scene though after all. Don't you believe me?" See James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, February 9, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 261-262.

<sup>28</sup> Mayo Smith to Henry Cowles, November 1, 1836, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 3, OCA.

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin P. Thomas, *Theodore Weld: Crusader for Freedom* (New Brunswick, 1950), 105.

<sup>30</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Elizur Wright, Jr., March 2, 1835, *Weld Letters*, I: 205-208; Thomas, *Theodore Weld*, 100-103.

<sup>31</sup> James A. Thome and John W. Alvord to Theodore Dwight Weld, February 9, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 256-262; Sereno W. Streeter to Theodore Dwight Weld, March 15, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 277-279;

This Oberlin student contingent formed almost one half of the American Anti-Slavery Society's lecturing cadre in the years 1835-1836, and even more were preparing to follow in their footsteps. After a visit to Oberlin in late 1836, Ohio Anti-Slavery Society financial agent Edward Weed reported that another large group of young men were preparing to enter the field as antislavery lecturers. They were all "young men of talents" as well as possessed of "pleasing address—skilled in the subject they are about to present." Moreover, Weed rejoiced that these Oberlinites were precisely of the sort the society most hoped to mobilize—"men of devoted piety—stimulated and urged on in the efforts they are about to make in behalf of suffering humanity, as I trust, by a pure and holy benevolence."<sup>32</sup>

The Oberlin students would not be alone in their efforts. Professors Henry Cowles and George Whipple left Oberlin during Weed's visit, intent on spending their winter break giving abolition lectures throughout Michigan. Their first stop was to be Ann Arbor to assist in forming a Michigan state antislavery society.<sup>33</sup> They were joined by Professor John P. Cowles, Yale honor graduate and brother of Henry. Earlier that winter, John Cowles had spent nearly four months lecturing in Michigan as an agent of the American Anti-Slavery Society, visiting at least 19 places that season.<sup>34</sup> The 1837 meeting of the Michigan society offered its hearty thanks to Cowles, and was also addressed by leading men of the Oberlin community as honorary voting members, including Oberlin president Asa Mahan, William T. Allan, Elihu P. Ingersoll, and, fresh from his settlement of former slaves in Canada West, Oberlin Institute alumnus Hiram Wilson.<sup>35</sup>

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James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, March 31, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 281-286; Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, 1996), 35.

<sup>32</sup> Edward Weed to Gamaliel Bailey, November 21, 1836, in *Philanthropist*, December 16, 1836.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Emancipator*, May 11, 1837; *Report of the Meeting of the Michigan State Anti-Slavery Society, June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1837, Being the First Annual Meeting, Adjourned from June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1837* (Detroit, 1837), 19.

<sup>35</sup> *Report of the Meeting of the Michigan State Anti-Slavery Society*, 4-5, 8.

As the decade wore on, dozens of Oberlin students served as agents for the American Anti-Slavery Society in Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and New York. They were so numerous and successful in Ohio that the national society was able to call Weld back to administrative duties in New York City after his visit to Oberlin in 1835. Elizur Wright, Jr. realized the vital importance of the Western region in the antislavery struggle, and informed Weld that he believed that “the band going out from Oberlin is more for the west than all our forces in the east.” They were recruiting legions of antislavery converts and participating in the formation of local antislavery societies on a scale unknown to the movement to that point and that would not be equaled in the future. Wright undoubtedly brimmed with pleasure as he wrote Weld that “We never before had so much to encourage us.”<sup>36</sup>

One noteworthy aspect of the efforts of the abolitionists from Oberlin of the mid 1830s was their appearance before individuals and communities whose only previous exposure to organized abolitionism was what they had heard or read second-hand about the arch-radical publisher of the *Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison.<sup>37</sup> The journalistic practice of the early nineteenth century was for newspaper editors to exchange copies of their journals with other publications which could then be excerpted to fill copy space, and Garrison regularly sent copies of the *Liberator* to over a hundred other editors, North and South.<sup>38</sup> However, pro-slavery and anti-abolitionist publishers often selectively quoted Garrison’s paper, allowing readers to

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<sup>36</sup> Elizur Wright, Jr. to Theodore Dwight Weld, November 18, 1835, *Weld Letters*, I: 245-246.

<sup>37</sup> Most Ohioans would not have taken such local abolitionist papers as the Cincinnati *Philanthropist*, and would have only read about abolitionists like Garrison in more critical and conservative journals. It would not be until a 1839 convention of the American Anti-Slavery Society meeting in Cleveland that many Ohioans would get their first view of eastern abolitionist leaders. As the Ravenna *Ohio Star* wrote, it was “an opportunity to view great delegations from the East with their nationally famous leaders whom the Ohioans had for the most part known only through their writings.” Ravenna *Ohio Star*, September 12, 1839; See also *Philanthropist*, November 5, 1839.

<sup>38</sup> *Liberator*, December 15, 1832; *Weld Letters*, I: viii; John C. Nerone, *Violence Against the Press: Policing the Public Sphere in U.S. History* (New York, 1994), 89; Gilbert Barnes, *The Anti-Slavery Impulse* (New York, 1933), 50.

read only the most radical of his writings. These excerpts were often inserted alongside crudely exaggerated commentary. One Northern paper on Garrison's exchange wrote under the heading "*Incendiary Publications*":

"We have frequently adverted in terms of censure to a publication issued in Boston, entitled the *Liberator*, and edited by *a fanatic of the name of Garrison*. The object of this publication appears to be twofold—the emancipation of the blacks from slavery on the EXTERMINATION OF THE WHITES."<sup>39</sup>

Since the Oberlin students and townsmen were also immediatists and representatives of the same national organization as Garrison, they had an opportunity to elaborate personally on the principles of immediatism and hence mitigate misconceptions.<sup>40</sup>

To be sure, the greatest obstacle abolitionists from Oberlin had to confront in their efforts was the naked intolerance of many of their listeners. However, among those whose racism did not place them totally outside the reaches of the abolitionists' argument, a great many had historically been turned off of the idea of immediate emancipation because of a misunderstanding of abolitionists' basic purposes. Due in large part to the misrepresentations of proslavery advocates, many Americans were under the mistaken conviction that abolitionists intended immediatism to mean the instantaneous emancipation of the enslaved and a resulting "discharge from all political restraints and obligations" of those who were thus freed. As one abolitionist newspaper noted with regret, the popular conception of immediate emancipation was that "of turning the slaves loose from all restraint."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *The Philadelphia Album*, n.d., in *Liberator*, October 15, 1831.

<sup>40</sup> See Catharine E. Beecher, *An Essay of Slavery and Abolition, with References to the Duty of American Females* (Philadelphia, 1837), 33-34.

<sup>41</sup> *Zion's Herald*, July 1, 1835.



Abolitionists' challenge was to disabuse people of these sensational notions and bring them to a more accurate understanding of just what ends immediatists sought. On the most basic level, all those who subscribed to the concept of abolitionism believed that slavery was a tremendous evil that *ought* to be immediately ended; the work to reach that end must begin at once. This was dramatically different than gradualists such as the colonizationists, who tolerated (and often encouraged) the continuance of slavery and only espoused emancipation if the newly-free African Americans were permanently removed from the United States.

Though abolitionists would develop differing variances on this theme in later years, even the "arch radical" William Lloyd Garrison's interpretation of the concept in the 1830s was not yet as revolutionary as critics charged him with. In *Thoughts on African Colonization* in 1832, Garrison enumerated a list of things which immediatism was *not*. "Immediate abolition," he wrote, "does not mean that the slaves shall immediately exercise the right of suffrage, or be eligible to any office, or be emancipated from law or be free from the benevolent restraints of guardianship." Rather, he declared,

We contend for the immediate personal freedom of the slave, from their exemption from punishment except where law has been violated, for their employment and reward as free laborers, for their exclusive right to their own bodies and those of their own children, for their instruction and subsequent admission to all the trusts, offices, honors and emoluments of intelligent freemen.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, however, Garrison's version of immediatism was not just concerned with the emancipation of the slaves in the South, but with the condition of

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<sup>42</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization, or, An Impartial Exhibition of the Doctrines, Principles and Purposes of the American Colonization Society* (Boston, 1832), 80.

free African Americans in the North. He saw racism as a fundamental barrier to widespread support for antislavery measures among Northerners and as something else which must be immediately abolished. Garrison personally advocated full social and civil equality of people regardless of skin color, and in some of the first issues of the *Liberator*, he launched a campaign to repeal Massachusetts' law against marriages between African Americans and whites and to abolish Jim Crow railroad cars.<sup>43</sup>

Garrison's self-proclaimed role as an antislavery agitator took abolition farther than it had ever been taken in America and challenged the rest of the country to follow him. With the *Liberator* as his personal soapbox, he pledged that "*I will be as harsh as truth, and uncompromising as justice...I do not wish to think or speak, or write, with moderation.*"<sup>44</sup> As the most visible figurehead in the antislavery movement, conservative newspaper editors often went out of their way to exaggerate Garrison's already radical positions, and were not beyond inflaming their readership with false or distorted rumors about the Boston editor. For those whose only exposure to Garrison was through these channels, they imagined him and every other abolitionist "to be in figure a monster of huge and horrid proportions."<sup>45</sup> As early as 1833, it was clear to abolitionists in Ohio that they must win over those who were prepared "to give up their 'gradualism' and their colonization as a remedy for slavery," but who could "not give up their grudge against Garrison!"<sup>46</sup>

Just as perfectionism to most abolitionists was a constant striving rather than an accomplishment, so was Garrison's immediatist standard. Few abolitionists approached Garrison's moral example, and the average citizen was even farther behind. To convert the skeptics, Oberlin abolitionists placed themselves somewhere

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<sup>43</sup> *Liberator*, January 8, 15, 1831.

<sup>44</sup> *Liberator*, January 1, 1831

<sup>45</sup> Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York, 1998), 141.

<sup>46</sup> Elizur Wright, Jr. to Theodore Dwight Weld, September 5, 1833, *Weld Letters*, I: 114-117.

in between Garrison's harshness and the citizens' hesitancy. James Thome's method of stilling the disquiet of a hostile audience was representative of their style. He had been invited to lecture in Akron, Ohio, but found that when he arrived, the town was "rampant for discussion," and hoped to "prove, to a demonstration, the absurdity and danger of Abolition."<sup>47</sup> Placed in the tricky position of having to first justify the appropriateness of his lecture even before presenting it, he began by explaining the true "*principles and designs* of Abolitionist Societies," as opposed to the prejudiced notions of which his listeners came already convinced. "First," he recalled, "I was particularly careful to *disclaim* certain things which are confounded with abolitionism; such as social intercourse, amalgamation, etc. I further stated that we did not claim for the slave the right of voting, immediately, or eligibility to office." His frustration was somewhat eased when the lawyer appointed to rebut him "expressed his astonishment at the *disclaimers* which [he] had made." Disarmed, the man declared that he was not quite ready "to go *all the lengths*" with Thome, but he admitted that the Oberlin man was "a NEW abolitionist" and had presented him with a perspective on abolitionism than he had known before. Thome then "proceeded to state what abolition *was*," and in his report to Weld, recalled that "I blazed and threw sky-rockets, talked of human rights, touched upon the Amer. Revolution and brought heaven and earth together."<sup>48</sup>

Though his speech had partially contradicted the A.A.S.S.'s mission statement, the constitution of the Oberlin Anti-Slavery Society of which he was a founding member, as well as his own personal beliefs regarding African Americans' place in society, Thome had distilled immediatism down to its core in order to bring more converts to the cause.<sup>49</sup> By setting aside more controversial topics ("bear-skins" and

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<sup>47</sup> James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, February 9, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 256-259.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> See *Debate at the Lane Seminary, Cincinnati: Speech of James A. Thome, of Kentucky, Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, May 6, 1834* (Boston, 1834), 7-11.

“a man of straw” he called them), Thome and those like him made immediatists of men and women first, then set them down the “striving” path which could eventually make them more consistent abolitionists.<sup>50</sup>

It was also their method of spreading their antislavery gospel that gave the movement a critical boost. The evangelical missionary impulse helped this new generation of abolitionists mobilize larger numbers of people in the countryside, far away from the urban centers favored by earlier reformers.<sup>51</sup> In their abolitionist revival, these speakers left nothing to be misunderstood. Their antislavery “sermons” steadily drove home their message, and like the best revivalists, they tenaciously wore down their opposition until conversion. As their critics accurately declared, they “pervade[d] the land, preaching up to nightly crowds a crusade against slavery.” They were described as “infuriate zealots” who “unfurl[ed] the banner of the cross as the standard to which the abolitionist is to rally.”<sup>52</sup>

Often, almost as soon as one lecturer or group of speakers left a town, another arrived to take their place, or the same speakers would make a return visit later to discourage backsliding. Thus every word of every speech had a cumulative effect, reinforcing arguments made earlier, or introducing new ones to then be reinforced themselves within a short period of time. As one modern rhetorician puts it, the early Ohio abolitionist campaigns of the Oberlin band, even if spread across a wide area, “were not isolated acts, but rather separate battles in a campaign with each battle representing another step toward the fulfillment of the campaign’s objective.”<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the reformers from Oberlin described their efforts in military terms, and even

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<sup>50</sup> James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, February 9, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 256-259.

<sup>51</sup> See Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 9.

<sup>52</sup> *Register of Debates in Congress, Comprising the Leading Debates and Incidents of the First Session of the Twenty Fourth Congress*, Vol. XII (Washington, D.C., 1836), 687.

<sup>53</sup> Clayton Douglas Cormany, “Ohio’s Abolitionist Campaign: A Study in the Rhetoric of Conversion,” PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1981, 15.

described the area of their abolitionist canvass as “a battle-field in the war with human slavery.”<sup>54</sup> Finney would have called it “spiritual warfare,” but whatever terminology was used, it was truly a “revival in abolitionism.”<sup>55</sup>

### **“A BREAKWATER AGAINST THE SURGES OF SKEPTICISM”**

Once immediatist lecturers from Oberlin had a chance to contradict misrepresentations and misunderstandings by clarifying their dedication to peaceful change (despite the militaristic rhetoric of their letters), abolitionism appeared to some formerly hostile opponents as a reasonable movement. As one historian suggests, just as they had earlier been deceived by colonizationists, people discovered that they had also been misled by groundless prejudice against immediatism. Especially in direct debates with colonizationists, these abolitionists were able to convincingly demonstrate the impracticability of sending millions of African Americans back to Africa, the opposition of free Blacks, and the concealed proslavery bases of colonizationist leaders.<sup>56</sup>

From late 1834 to early 1836, Oberlin lecturers had been concentrated in Ohio, New York, and Massachusetts, and as a result, nearly two thirds of all A.A.S.S. auxiliary societies had been formed in those states. Conversely, states like Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and New Jersey, places where abolitionist agents had made few inroads, contained only thirty two, fifteen, and six societies, respectively. Noting the connection between the organized dedicated lecturing campaign (the

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<sup>54</sup> Sereno W. Streeter to Theodore Dwight Weld, July 20, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 315-317; James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, September 9, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 339-342; *The Oberlin Jubilee: 1833-1883*, ed. W.G. Ballantine (Oberlin, 1883), 274; Fairchild, *Oberlin: It's Origins, Progress, and Results*, 26.

<sup>55</sup> See Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology* (Oberlin, 1847), 36, 173-174, 307; *Weld Letters*, I:x.

<sup>56</sup> Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley, 1998), 130-131. See also the account of Oberlin Institute alumnus George Hornell's 1835 victory over colonizationists in *The Oberlin Students' Monthly*, Vol.I, No.XI, September, 1859, 401; *The International Review*, Vol. 13 (September, 1882), 194-196.

agency system) and the tangible growth of abolitionist sentiment, the Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society cut their production of antislavery publications by more than two thirds and directed their most aggressive efforts towards swelling their force of agents.<sup>57</sup>

The expanded agency system was to be made up of seventy men, a number of powerful biblical significance. These men were to stand as the seventy pillars of the Jerusalem temple, to preach as the seventy elders called by Moses, and evangelize like the seventy men Jesus called after first selecting his twelve apostles.<sup>58</sup> Theodore Weld had primary responsibility for selecting new recruits, assisted by the abolitionist poet John Greenleaf Whittier and Lane Rebel Henry B. Stanton. These men visited Northern colleges to enlist “men of the most unquenchable enthusiasm, and the most obstinate constancy.”<sup>59</sup> They made extraordinary efforts to recruit young theological students, those who they believed “exhibited better specimens of intellectual and moral worth.”<sup>60</sup>

The Oberlin Institute had been the source of some of the A.A.S.S.’s most effective lecturers to that point, and again, it was the first place Weld turned to recruit more helpers in the cause. Oberlin students had proven themselves as the embodiment of “intellectual and moral worth,” and their participation among the “seventy” would be absolutely vital. However, when Weld appealed to Oberlin leaders for help, he ran

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<sup>57</sup> *Third Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (New York, 1836), 99; John L. Meyers, “The Organization of ‘The Seventy’: To Arouse the North Against Slavery,” in *Abolitionism and American Reform*, ed. John R. McKivigan (New York, 1999), 30; See also Goodman, *Of One Blood*, 130-134.

<sup>58</sup> See Exodus 24:9 and Luke 10:24. See also *Liberator*, November 5, 26, December 17, 1836; Lydia Maria Child to Henrietta Sargent, November 13, 1836, in *Letters of Lydia Maria Child, with a Biographical Introduction* (Boston, 1882), 24-25; Charles Follen to Harriet Martineau, November 26, 1836, in *The Works of Charles Follen*, Vol.1 (Boston, 1842), 423-424; Meyers, “The Organization of ‘The Seventy,’” 278.

<sup>59</sup> *Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, Vol.1, ed. Samuel T. Pickard (Boston, 1899), 250; Henry B. Stanton, *Random Recollections* (New York, 1887), 56-57; (New York) *The Plaindealer*, January 14, 1837; *Fifth Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society* (Boston, 1837), xx.

<sup>60</sup> *Liberator*, November 3, 1837; Barnes, *The Anti-Slavery Impulse*, 105.

into some unexpected resistance: Charles Grandison Finney.<sup>61</sup> Though he rejoiced at the results of the recent lecture tours of his students, Finney maintained (as he would the entire antebellum period) that focusing solely on abolitionism often confounded broad revivalism, and that often-times violent responses to antislavery agitation represented a prelude to civil strife which threatened to tear apart the United States.<sup>62</sup>

However, Finney had also taught his students the value of independent thinking. According to William T. Allan, although the evangelist “groans over the [abolition] subject and speaks of himself as being agonized by it,” Finney ultimately refused to do more than simply express his own opinions.<sup>63</sup> Rather than strong-arm them away from antislavery lecturing, he met with his students and seriously discussed the pros and cons of the enterprise.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, Weld’s own barrage of letters to his potential Oberlin recruits was convincing enough to override much of Finney’s discouragement.<sup>65</sup> In the end, most of the Oberlin lecturers who had gone out before accepted new agencies among the “seventy,” and even more students joined up for the first time.<sup>66</sup> Of the majority of the “seventy” who have been identified by historians, nearly a third were from Oberlin.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> See William T. Allan, Sereno W. Streeter, John W. Alvord, and James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, August 9, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 323-329.

<sup>62</sup> Charles Grandison Finney to Theodore Dwight Weld, July 21, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 318-320.

<sup>63</sup> John W. Alvord to Theodore Dwight Weld, August 9, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 326-327.

<sup>64</sup> William T. Allan, Sereno W. Streeter, John W. Alvord, and James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, August 9, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 323-329. This episode, in addition to Finney’s objections to mixed seating at the Chatham Street Chapel and Broadway Tabernacle, his disapproval of the appointment of an African American man to the Chatham Board of Trustees, as well as his early hesitancy to make racial equality a demand of his interpretation of immediatism, has been used by historians to call into question Finney’s abolitionism. See Meyers, “The Organization of ‘The Seventy,’” 282; Lesick, *The Lane Rebels*, 180-181; Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney*, 173; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (Cleveland, 1969), 177-8.

<sup>65</sup> Weld’s letters to the Oberlin students have not survived, but his replies are acknowledged in James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, September 9, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 339-342; Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, October 24, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 345-346.

<sup>66</sup> Those that did not, like Sereno Streeter, remained very active as abolitionist lecturers locally, even as an agent of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society. See *Philanthropist*, October 22, November 26, 1839, January 21, April 28, May 26, 1840.

<sup>67</sup> *Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831-1857*, Vol.1, ed. Dwight L. DuMond (Gloucester, 1966), 357n2. Among the “seventy” were Oberlin students William T. Allan, George Allen, John Watson

Agents were to be paid between five and six hundred dollars per year, a generous amount considering that Oberlin Institute professors worked for “such as mere clerks in a New York store would decline,” and never made more than six hundred dollars per year before the Civil War.<sup>68</sup> Still, many recruits asked the Executive Committee for advances on their pay to defray their initial expenses. Since the Society was already stretched financially and was unable to meet these requests, some recruits could not accept their appointments for lack of funds. Oberlin’s students in particular, many of them already having to work their way through college by the sweat of their manual labor, required some considerable advances on their pay. However, Weld realized that the participation of this Oberlin contingent was absolutely vital to the success of the “seventy” venture. When it became obvious that their involvement was in jeopardy, his high esteem for them led Weld to beg Lewis Tappan to advance them each five to fifteen dollars apiece. If the Executive Committee remained unmovable in their decision not to advance lecturers’ salaries, Weld offered to pay the Oberlin men directly out of his own pocket, an amount which would have been nearly three hundred dollars.<sup>69</sup>

Once on their feet, the Oberlin agents were some of the most widely dispersed of the group, with assignments in New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Michigan, Ohio, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts. Hiram Wilson accepted his assignment as “agent to the Negroes in Canada,” and James A. Thome sailed to Antigua, Barbados, and Jamaica to report back on the results of British emancipation, which had been

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Alvord, Courtland Avery, J.M. Blakesley, Amos Dresser, Edward H. Fairchild, Hiram Foote, Huntington Lyman, James Milligan, John T. Pierce, Samuel Fuller Porter, Charles S. Renshaw, William P. Russell, James A. Thome, George Whipple, and Hiram Wilson.

<sup>68</sup> Julia Shearman to Editor, June 6, 1870, (London) *The Christian*, August 4, 1870; Fairchild, *Oberlin: Its Origin, Progress, and Results*, 55; Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 211.

<sup>69</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, October 24, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I:345-346.



declared in 1834.<sup>70</sup> They were also the busiest out of the gate. While the American Anti-Slavery Society agency committee called the rest of the “seventy” to New York City for a multi-week crash training session, those from Oberlin who were already alumni of Weld’s 1835 Oberlin/Cleveland school of abolitionism bypassed the conclave and immediately commenced their lecturing efforts.<sup>71</sup>

However, Oberlin agents soon found themselves again stymied by the effects of misinformation that had been circulated regarding William Lloyd Garrison. Before, their biggest obstacle had been overcoming exaggerated misrepresentations of Garrison and the idea of immediatism. To a large degree, they were able to distance themselves from Garrison’s most radical doctrines and correct many of the rampant misapprehensions regarding abolitionists and their immediatist intentions. But as they conducted a religious crusade to convert men and women to abolitionism, Oberlin’s abolitionist agents also had to explain to potential converts Garrison’s broad censure of the churches and clergy. Many Americans considered these institutions to be the very loci of spiritual authority and guidance. Garrison himself had begun his abolitionist crusade under the same conviction and was confident that the institutional church could be his greatest ally. Yet the conservatism of church bodies with regard to the slavery question proved to be one of the most formidable obstacles to the abolitionist agenda, forming, as James G. Birney famously declared in 1840, “the bulwarks of American slavery.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> James A. Thome and J. Horace Kimball, *Emancipation in the West Indies: A Six Months Tour in Antigua, Barbados, and Jamaica in the Year 1837*, second ed. (New York, 1839), iii-vi; *Boston Quarterly Review*, Vol.1, No.3 (July, 1838), 385-386; J.J. Flourney, *A Reply, to a Pamphlet, Entitled Bondage, a Moral Institution, Sanctioned by the Scriptures, &c., &c., So Far as it Attacks the Principles of Expulsion, with No Defense, However, of Abolitionism* (Athens, GA, 1838), 48-66; Meyers, “The Organization of ‘The Seventy,’” 39-40.

<sup>71</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, October 24, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 345-346; Elizur Wright, Jr. to James G. Birney, October 12, 1836, *Birney Letters*, I: 364-366; *Liberator*, November 26, December 17, 1836; *New York Evangelist*, December 10, 1836; Stanton, *Random Recollections*, 57.

<sup>72</sup> See James G. Birney, *The American Churches the Bulwarks of American Slavery* (London, 1840).

Garrison had been raised in a devout Baptist household, and spent countless hours in his youth piping out the words to he and his mothers' favorite hymns. Even in his old age, he never lost his love for the religiosity of his childhood, and as one historian writes, "from his boyhood upward, Garrison's mind was soaked in the Bible and in no other book."<sup>73</sup> He lauded the revivals of the 1820s and early 1830s, and prayed that they not cease "till the bodies and souls of its population be 'redeemed, regenerated, and disenthralled.'" "Take courage, ye mourning slaves," he wrote at the height of the Great Western Revival, "for your redemption is at hand."<sup>74</sup>

As a young printer in late 1820s Boston, Garrison was thus attracted to the message of evangelical uplift offered by Lyman Beecher, and admired him for his preaching powers and ability to influence his congregants. However, when Garrison appealed to Beecher for support in his abolitionist efforts, he was sorely disappointed. Beecher told him that "I have too many irons in the fire already," and though he commended Garrison's zeal, he concluded that the young man was misguided. Rather, if Garrison would give up his "fanatical notions" and follow the gradualist agenda of the clergy Beecher represented, their support would help him become "the Wilberforce of America."<sup>75</sup>

Instead, Garrison openly criticized the institutional churches and the clergy that led them for their refusal to speak out against slavery. National church bodies included members and even ministers who were slaveowners. However, while they sternly rebuked those with whom they were in communion for sins such as drunkenness, seduction, murder, or other grave sins, few Northern churches or their

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<sup>73</sup> Oliver Johnson, *William Lloyd Garrison and his Times* (Boston, 1881), 401; John Jay Chapman, *William Lloyd Garrison* (Boston, 1921), 165; Mayer, *All on Fire*, 13.

<sup>74</sup> Johnson, *William Lloyd Garrison and his Times*, 68.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, 44. William Wilberforce was a famous British politician and abolitionist who was a leader in that country's movement to abolish the slave trade. See Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce, by his Sons*, 2 Vols., (Philadelphia, 1841); Robin Furneaux, *William Wilberforce*, (Vancouver, 2006).

leaders spoke out against slavery in a similar way. While Southern pulpits were used to defend slavery, Northern ones seldom pointed out their errors, and, by their silence, tightened slavery's grip. In fact, many Northern clerics encouraged a patently anti-abolitionist agenda and used their authority to stifle debate over the slavery issue. For the sake of national denominational unity, ministers attempted to quiet antislavery agitation in their churches. When it became an issue, they attempted to shut it down by barring their doors to antislavery speakers, criticizing them in the press, and by passing resolutions at national conventions recommending for punishment those who circulated or subscribed to antislavery publications.<sup>76</sup>

As he had promised in the *Liberator's* first issue, Garrison did not "equivocate" or "retreat a single inch" in meeting this opposition.<sup>77</sup> His description in the *Liberator* of one Ohio church body as a "CAGE OF UNCLEAN BIRDS, AND SYNAGOGUE OF SATAN" after they wavered on an official statement regarding slavery was not unique.<sup>78</sup> If they would not at least allow abolitionists a hearing, to say nothing of outwardly denouncing slavery, Garrison asked "What then is 'the Church' but the synagogue of Satan, and 'the great mass of the clergy' but hirelings, dumb dogs that cannot bark.'" <sup>79</sup> Though it was his intent to raise the standard of Christian revolt against "the powers of darkness," he increasingly characterized those church leaders who compromised with social evil as being under "Satanic influences," perhaps even more so than slaveholders themselves.<sup>80</sup> In doing so, however, he potentially alienated many religious Americans who represented the abolitionist lecturers' most likely converts.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> See Birney, *The American Churches*, 7-48; Mayer, *All on Fire*, 233-239.

<sup>77</sup> *Liberator*, January 1, 1831.

<sup>78</sup> (Boston) *Zion's Herald*, August 3, 1836.

<sup>79</sup> *Liberator*, September 8, 1837.

<sup>80</sup> *Liberator*, August 13, 1836;

<sup>81</sup> See (Hudson) *Genius of Temperance*, March 21, 1833, in *Liberator*, June 8, 1833; (Boston) *Zion's Herald*, August 3, 1836; (Philadelphia) *North American Magazine*, June, 1833; Timothy L. Smith,

Garrison at this point was well on his way to a conclusion that the church and its attendant institutional hierarchy, all too human in its creation, actually stood in the way of the divine order which God intended. The slavery issue simply made it all the more obvious. By frustrating churchgoers from the chance to live their lives in obedience to God's moral law, Garrison charged denominational hierarchies with exercising a despotism similar to that of the wicked slaveholder.<sup>82</sup> To those that would label him an infidel, Garrison replied that he was so "only in the same sense in which Jesus was a blasphemer, and the apostles were 'pestilent and seditious fellows, seeking to turn the world upside down.'" His movement, he clarified, was

infidel to Satan, the enslaver; it is loyal to Christ, the redeemer...It is infidel to a Church which receives to its communion the 'traffickers in slaves and the souls of men;' it is loyal to the Church which is not stained with blood, nor polluted by oppression. It is infidel to the Bible, interpreted as a pro-slavery volume; it is faithful to it as construed on the side of justice and humanity.<sup>83</sup>

Nonetheless, Garrison's logic was lost on most Northern church leaders. He and the *Liberator*, though not speaking officially on behalf of the American Anti-Slavery Society, stood for abolition generally in many ministers' minds. The Massachusetts and Connecticut Associations of Congregational clergymen passed resolutions effectively closing their churches to all "itinerant agents and lecturers" who threatened to disturb the peace of their church and their authority as leaders.<sup>84</sup>

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*Revivalism and Social reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (New York, 1957), 178-203.

<sup>82</sup> See Douglas Strong, *Perfectionist Politics: Abolition and the Religious Tensions of American Democracy* (Syracuse, 1999), 53.

<sup>83</sup> Johnson, *William Lloyd Garrison and his Times*, 369-370.

<sup>84</sup> *Liberator*, April 5, 1839; William Goodell, *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A History of the Great Struggle in Both Hemispheres; With a View of the Slavery Question in the United States* (New York, 1855), 429-430. These resolutions were soon followed by almost all of the Presbyterian churches in the Northern states as well. Also, as Parker Pillsbury later pointed out, these resolutions were passed with direct reference to antislavery agents. Only antislavery threatened to "disturb the peace" of the churches; all

This in turn, made it harder for abolitionists to make headway with already skeptical audiences. Abolitionists from Oberlin attempting to penetrate into New England often found “many of the friends of Christ” arrayed against them. The initial hurdle of trying to explain why religious bodies seemed to be opposed to their message threatened to undercut their effectiveness.<sup>85</sup>

Still, although initially having to spend valuable time explaining how the antislavery movement could possibly have God’s support despite the apparent opposition of the denominational church, abolitionists from Oberlin were largely successful in playing down the fears of churchgoing audiences who had come to equate abolitionism with infidelity. Like Garrison, they appreciated the power of the clergy over their flocks, and held the same opinion of what organized churches ought to be. However, unlike the irascible Bostonian, who held that “the Church, so called,” must “be dashed in pieces,” Oberlinites stressed the need to reform it from within through “bold preaching of the truth as they saw it, and for plain dealing with the brethren whom they thought unjust and misguided.”<sup>86</sup> They sensed that Garrison’s idea of a proper ecclesiology completely ignored the need for a united community of believers, and feared that, alongside the destruction of church bodies which winked at slavery, he also sought “the annihilation of the *true* Christian church.” Ecclesiastical abolitionists did not always accept the validity of existing denominational structures, but they still acknowledged the need for sanctified abolitionists to worship together in purified churches of their own.<sup>87</sup>

Oberlin abolitionists became well known for “arresting or preventing the infidelity which has, in some cases, been associated with anti-slavery and other

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other sins were open for vigorous debate. See Parker Pillsbury, *The Church As It Is: The Forlorn Hope of Slavery* (Boston, 1847), 84.

<sup>85</sup> John P. Cowles to Henry Cowles, February 6, 1838, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 18, OCA.

<sup>86</sup> *Liberator*, July 28, 1837; *The Oberlin Jubilee*, 280-281.

<sup>87</sup> *The Oberlin Jubilee*, 59.

reforms.” Wherever they went, they attempted to appear as both Christians and abolitionists. Their lives and labors, alum Timothy Hudson wrote, were “an unanswerable demonstration that the Gospel makes men true reformers, and that the doctrine in which extreme conservatism and infidel radicalism seem agreed, that Christianity and reform cannot go together, is an arrogant lie.” As ecclesiastical abolitionists, Hudson concluded that “Oberlin has erected a breakwater against the surges of skepticism, which has saved many souls from ruin.”<sup>88</sup>

Oberlinites often began an antislavery lecture by laying out their own particular religious ideology. Their initial remarks would explain their understanding of man’s place in God’s universe, white and black, slave and free: all were equal in God’s eyes, and all were entitled to the moral free will denied by slavery. Those who did not hold those beliefs were bound to repent, yet the institutionalized church was not to be torn down, but purified from within. In the process, they would reassure their listeners that their particular meeting would not resemble some of the Garrisonian meetings they may have heard or read about such as a New England gathering where, as Oberlin professor John Cowles remarked, there seemed to be “not much of the spirit of God but an overflowing spirit on censure...made up of *treason*, *defection*, *sedition*, & such like hard words.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, “Extra,” September 1857. Hudson’s look back at the early efforts of abolitionists from Oberlin was written after Garrison had begun to disavow the necessity of keeping the Sabbath as well as the total divine inspiration of the Bible, views which actually did convince many in the Oberlin community that Garrison was an “infidel.” In the context of the 1830s, Hudson’s statements would have referred to *perceived* “infidel radicalism,” etc.

<sup>89</sup> John P Cowles to Henry Cowles, February 6, 1838, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 18, OCA. Oberlin professor James Monroe, who began his abolitionist career as a Garrisonian lecturer for the American Anti-Slavery Society before coming to Oberlin and modifying his ideological views regarding antislavery, summed up the Garrisonian tendency towards denunciation and its results among potential antislavery converts: “A is a slaveholder, and therefore a criminal. B knows this, but apologizes for A; therefore B is a criminal. C admits that A is morally depraved, but thinks that B may be an honest man. As this is plainly wrong, C also is a sinner. Now comes D who condemns A and B, but as C is his neighbor, and he approves what he has seen of his spirit, he thinks that C may be upright. Now we must condemn D; and this process goes on to the end of the alphabet...Of course, this alphabet included all the world but themselves. Nay more, if one of themselves, in a moment of weakness, ventured to suggest that some man in the neighborhood of S or T might be virtuous, he was denounced and virtually

Though the abolitionists from Oberlin were just as disappointed as the most radical Garrisonians in their frustration with churches and their leaders, they registered their disapproval through earnest pleas to repent. Certain actions or individuals aroused their scorn, but they saw little use in damning those who were only vicariously associated with the “bad seeds.”<sup>90</sup> Indeed, Oberlin Institute student John W. Alvord saw the prospects for abolitionist conversion much more likely through “a *few words* ad[d]ressed to the warm heart of the convert or to a broken down church,” rather than “*many words* when poured upon the flinty rock.”<sup>91</sup> Professor James Monroe compared Garrison’s view of the Church to the traveler who found his way blocked by a fallen rock. Rather than sensibly finding men and leverage enough to dislodge the rock from the road, the traveler insisted upon remaining “stock still” until he had devised a universal solvent which would dissolve every bit of rock “of the globe that we inhabit.” Monroe deemed such a method “a slow way to reach the end of the journey, to say nothing of the question whether we can afford to lose the granite.”<sup>92</sup>

Oberlin abolitionists wanted to make the churches the bedrock of the movement, purifying and organizing it as an antislavery society unto itself, saving souls and the slave all at once.<sup>93</sup> They approached their largely religious audiences through terms to which they would instantly relate, rather than through jarring

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excommunicated. It used to be said that no true abolitionist would think well of a man that would think well of a man that would think well of a slaveholder. Now this rule was, in some respects, a very convenient one. It was simple and easily applied. It saved much trouble in thinking and investigating. When you met a man you were under no necessity of observing his conduct, studying his spirit, or listening to the testimony of his neighbors. You only need to know that he stood somewhere between A and Z. But while this rule saved time and trouble, it had its disadvantages...It produced unnecessary friction, divided true men, and weakened their power for good. There can be no doubt that this error did much to retard the success of the cause, and success which would have come in the best way, by the wide diffusion and candid reception of truth. See James Monroe, “The Early Abolitionists,” in *Oberlin Thursday Lectures, Addresses, and Essays* (Oberlin, 1897), 18-19.

<sup>90</sup> See Sereno W. Streeter to Theodore Dwight Weld, August 9, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 325-326.

<sup>91</sup> John W. Alvord to Theodore Dwight Weld, August 9, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 326-327.

<sup>92</sup> Monroe, “The Early Abolitionists,” 25-26.

<sup>93</sup> John W. Alvord to Theodore Dwight Weld, August 9, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 326-327.

diatribes which might implicate the majority of the gathered spectators. When a hostile crowd made it necessary, they would gradually work their way into an abolitionist lecture by beginning their address as a sermon on the religious duties of evangelicals. This would sometimes allow them to form an important connection and familiarity with their listeners, especially church members, before moving on to the more controversial duties perfectionism imposed on Christians with regards to abolitionism. This approach allowed lecturers to do more for the cause than might have been accomplished by a more direct effort, though even the indirect course often met harsh resistance.<sup>94</sup>

Especially since most of their opponents would have been much less informed regarding the issues than the trained lecturers, an early and clear demonstration that the Bible opposed slavery sometimes converted those who were “almost totally ignorant, not only of slavery, but of the principles of abolition which [they] had come to oppose.”<sup>95</sup> To be sure, proslavery advocates quoted scripture to suggest a biblical support for slavery. However, Oberlin abolitionists, most of whom were graduate theological students trained by Charles Grandison Finney, Asa Mahan, Henry Cowles, John Morgan, and others, brought an expert’s knowledge of the Bible to the table, and used it with a revivalist’s determination to convert. In their able hands, the Bible offered evidence as to the sinfulness of slavery. Often, as William Allan stated, “the result was good for the truth,” and local antislavery societies formed in abolitionists’ wake.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> *Emancipator*, October 20, 1836; Lesick, *The Lane Rebels*, 182.

<sup>95</sup> *Emancipator*, February 12, 1836; James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, February 9, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 256-259; John W. Alvord to Theodore Dwight Weld, February 9, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 259-261.

<sup>96</sup> *Emancipator*, February 12, 1836



**“EVERY MAN AND WOMAN MUST BE AN AGENT”**

In the late 1830s, the contingent of abolitionists from Oberlin had played a vital part in spreading what slaveholding Kentucky Senator Henry Clay called the “contagion” of abolitionism across Ohio, the West, and even parts of New England and the Mid-Atlantic.<sup>97</sup> As in revivals, the antislavery lecturers seldom left towns unaffected. Sometimes, an abolitionist revival would result in the formation of a local antislavery society which would continue the crusade to convert others to immediatism. By 1836, Ohio alone claimed more than a quarter of all abolition societies in the nation.<sup>98</sup> By 1837, there were eighty more local societies formed in Ohio, bringing the state’s membership roll to at least twenty thousand active abolitionists. Whenever the Oberlin Anti-Slavery Society held its meetings, it did so as one of the largest auxiliaries to the American Anti-Slavery Society in the entire nation.<sup>99</sup>

Oberlin abolitionists were also able to deal heavy blows to the American Colonization Society in the West. In 1838, a colonizationist in Ohio wrote to the Secretary of the national society begging him to send competent agents to his region immediately. He wrote that “We have been struggling for the last four or five years, against the current of abolition which has been setting strong upon us.” Ohio, he wrote, had been “literally flooded with abolition agents and publications,” the source of which he traced to “*Oberlin Institute*, where they manufacture the *article* by

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<sup>97</sup> Henry Clay to Francis T. Brooke, November 3, 1838, in Henry Clay, *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol.IX, ed. Robert Seager (Lexington, 1988), 246.

<sup>98</sup> In 1835, the number of anti-slavery societies reporting to the American Anti-Slavery Society had grown from 60 to 200 (of which Ohio claimed 38), and by 1836, the total number was 523 (of which Ohio claimed 133, thirty more than New York’s second highest number). *Second Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society; with the Speeches Delivered at the Anniversary Meeting, Held in the City of New York, on the Twelfth of May, 1835, and the Minutes of the Society for Business* (New York, 1835), 37; *The Third Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society; with the Speeches Delivered at the Anniversary Meeting, Held in the City of New York, on the Tenth of May, 1836, and the Minutes of the Society for Business* (New York, 1836), 33.

<sup>99</sup> *Philanthropist*, October 10, 1837.

wholesale.” He complained that they “spring up like mushrooms, and overspread the land.”<sup>100</sup> They had nearly paralyzed the efforts of the Society, and the local auxiliaries which had not “deserted” had essentially ceased to act at all. The writer feared that if the A.C.S. could not “make inroads upon the enemy,” this “hot-bed of abolitionism” could spell their doom.<sup>101</sup>

A key tactic lecturing agents often used in their appeals for support was to have audience members sign an anti-slavery petition to be sent to lawmakers, urging them to use the power of their elected positions towards particular anti-slavery measures or to prevent the passage of those they believed had proslavery motives behind them. Similar efforts had played an important role in the Northern emancipation movement in the late eighteenth century, and a steady trickle of antislavery memorials had made their way the nation’s capital through the 1820s, including some from Founding Fathers as influential as Benjamin Franklin.<sup>102</sup> The 1833 constitution of the American Anti-Slavery Society had admonished its members to influence Congress to end the domestic slave trade and to abolish the institution everywhere it had the constitutional power to do so, especially the District of Columbia and the Territories.”<sup>103</sup> Oberlin professors Henry Cowles and Timothy B. Hudson also incorporated similar language into the constitution of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society in 1835, binding members to their “imperative duty” of extending their influence as far as legally possible.<sup>104</sup> Since the most logical way to accomplish

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<sup>100</sup> Anonymous to Secretary of the American Colonization Society, May 29, 1838, in *The African Repository and Colonial Journal*, Vol.XIV, No.5 (May, 1838), 150-151.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol.X, ed. Albert Henry Smyth (New York, 1907), 66-68, 86-87; James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York, 1976), 80; Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 2005), 227; See also Julie Winch, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten* (New York, 2002), 152-153.

<sup>103</sup> *Declaration of Sentiments and Constitution of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (Philadelphia, 1861), 17-18.

<sup>104</sup> *Proceedings of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Convention, Held at Putnam, on the Twenty Second, Twenty Third, and Twenty Fourth Day of April, 1835* (n.p., 1835), 11-12.

this was by directly appealing to Congressional representatives, Oberlin agents used the petitioning strategy to their advantage.

The activities of the large numbers of antislavery agents in 1835 initiated the first major stream of anti-slavery petitions to Congress numerous enough to merit any sustained discussion regarding them among lawmakers. South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun complained that the new wave of petitions was unique, not “singly and far apart, from the quiet routine of the Society of Friends or the obscure vanity of some philanthropic club, but...in vast numbers from soured and agitated communities.” Calhoun rightly believed that they were a Northern attempt to disable the South’s most vital institution, and their discussion before a national body was considered unacceptable. He pronounced them “the most daring attempt against American liberty, that has yet been brought forward in Congress, since the foundation of the Republic.”<sup>105</sup> He therefore moved that the Senate refuse to receive them altogether.<sup>106</sup>

Though Calhoun’s resolutions inspired spirited debate in the Senate, they did not pass. However, after weeks of similar discussion in the House, a special committee recommended that all petitions relating in any way or to any extent whatsoever to the subject of slavery or its abolition be laid upon the table without discussion.<sup>107</sup> Though opponents immediately pronounced the resolution as unconstitutional and contrary to the rules of the House and the spirit of free discussion, a majority pushed it through, and it was re-passed in similar form at each session until it became a standing rule in 1840.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Calhoun, quoted in Benjamin Franklin Morris, *The Life of Thomas Morris: Pioneer and Long a Legislator of Ohio, and, U.S. Senator from 1833 to 1839* (Cincinnati, 1856), 103.

<sup>106</sup> *Register of Debates in Congress, Comprising the Leading Debates and Incidents of the First Session of the Twenty-Fourth Congress*, Vol.XII (Washington, D.C., 1836), 684.

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, 3754.

<sup>108</sup> *Abridgements of the Debates of Congress from 1789-1856*, Vol.XIII (New York, 1860), 28; Alfred Bushnell Hart, *Slavery and Abolition, 1831-1841* (New York, 1906), 270-271. When the rules of the House were revised in 1844, John Quincy Adams fought for several days against the inclusion of this rule, and it was finally abandoned by a vote of 108 to 80.

This immediately became known as the infamous “gag rule,” and even more than moderate abolitionists’ elucidation of the nuances of immediatism, this act of Congress suggested to many Northerners that antislavery was not just Garrisonian radicalism. Antislavery, or at least the abridgement of every citizens’ First Amendment rights that the denial of antislavery petitions represented, became an issue that hypothetically affected every American. The *Oberlin Evangelist* pointed out that Congress acted against the wishes of most Americans when it refused to consider the passage of “righteous laws.”<sup>109</sup> Though prominent Congressmen called the petition issue “a mere abstraction,” and despite the Congressional gag, even *because* of it, abolitionists continued to flood lawmakers’ offices with antislavery petitions. Some even assured the men to whom they addressed their grievances that they would submit the same petition year after year until it was finally acknowledged from the floor of Congress.<sup>110</sup>

In abolition centers like Oberlin, antislavery petitions circulated continuously.<sup>111</sup> For there not to have been a petition effort underway at any given time would have seemed peculiar. However, in areas not so fully abolitionized (which remained the vast majority), agents often ran into difficulties gathering signatures. Petitions called for the end of slavery and the slave trade in Washington, D.C. and the ending of slavery and non-extension where the federal government had jurisdiction. This meant

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<sup>109</sup> This included Southerners as well. Waddy Thompson of South Carolina was one of the first to object to the resolution on libertarian grounds. See *Register of Debates...XII*, 3754; *Oberlin Evangelist*, November 6, 1839.

<sup>110</sup> *Niles National Register*, June 26, 1841; *Friend of Man*, September 5, 1838; Joshua Giddings to Henry Cowles, January 22, 1839, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 18, OCA.

<sup>111</sup> Joshua Giddings to Henry Cowles, January 22, 1839, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 18, OCA; *Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States, Being the Third Session of the Twenty Fifth Congress, Begun and Held, at the City of Washington, December 3, 1838* (Washington, D.C., 1839), 232-233, 476-477; L.P. Brockett, *Men of Our Day, or, Biographical Sketches of Patriots, Orators, Statesmen, Generals, Reformers, Financiers and Merchants, Now on the Stage of Action* (Philadelphia, 1868), 239-240; Smith, *Liberty and Free Soil Parties*, 12; See also *Philanthropist*, January 15, 1836 for an example of a blank petition form that would have been circulated by an Ohio abolitionist agent.

subscribing one's self to many of the most important aspects of the American Anti-Slavery Society platform. While ending the embarrassment of slavery in the nation's capital may not have been a hard sell to many Northerners, the remainder of the petition would have been a bitter pill to swallow for men and women who still felt like they had little or no personal investment in the national slavery issue, and who may have doubted the ultimate expediency of emancipation.

As shorthanded agents continued to be overwhelmed, they began to request appropriate literature to help them spread the antislavery message and convince any possible holdouts. They wanted solid treatises on slavery and abolitionist ideology to supplement their own efforts when their time was spread thin or to leave behind in a locality after it had already been canvassed. To meet this need, Weld quickly put together some thoughts on abolition and Congressional powers which were published in the *New York Evening Post* and later collected as a fifty five page pamphlet *The Power of Congress Over the District of Columbia*. This Weld wrote under the pseudonym "Wythe," as well as an anonymous pamphlet titled simply *The Bible Against Slavery*.<sup>112</sup>

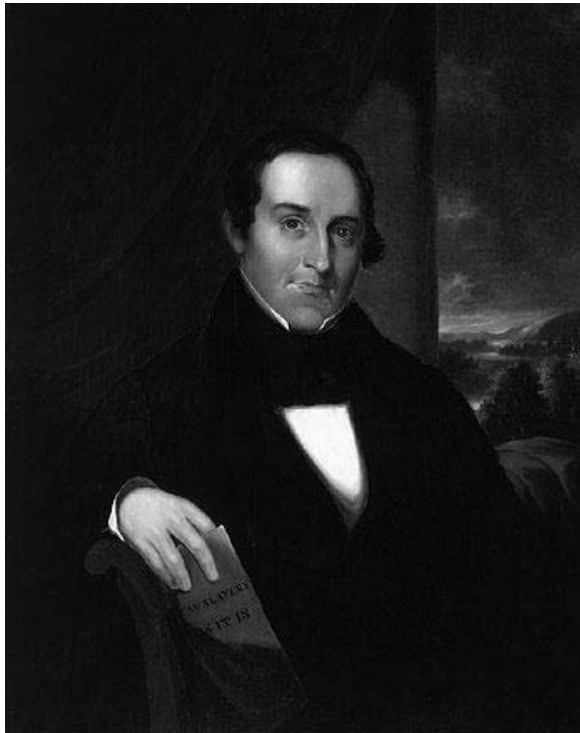
Oberlin abolitionists lent their efforts to helping with the compilation of some of the more substantial works to meet the literary demand. James A. Thome assisted Weld with the writing of his most important work *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, and contributed his own first hand experiences with Kentucky slavery to the text.<sup>113</sup> Weld and the Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society so valued Thome's contributions that he was retained

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<sup>112</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld, *The Power of Congress Over the District of Columbia, Reprinted from the New York Evening Post, with Additions by the Author* (New York, 1838); Theodore Dwight Weld, *The Bible Against Slavery: An Inquiry Into the Patriarchal and Mosaic Systems on the Subject of Human Rights* (New York, 1837).

<sup>113</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York, 1839).

to do most of the research and writing for their 1841 publication *Slavery and the Internal Slave Trade in the United States of North America*.<sup>114</sup> The Society had intended to publish the work prior to the inaugural World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London in June of 1840, but was delayed when most of Thome's materials were destroyed by fire. Sensing the importance of his work, Thome volunteered to labor for several weeks without pay, and though late, Thome and Weld's second collaboration made it to press and into the hands of eager readers on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>115</sup>



**Illustration 4.1: James Armstrong Thome**  
**(note copy of *American Slavery As It Is* in his hand)**  
**(National Portrait Gallery)**

<sup>114</sup> James A. Thome and Theodore Dwight Weld, *Slavery and the Internal Slave Trade in the United States of North America: Being Replies to Questions Transmitted by the Committee of The British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, for the Abolition of Slavery and the Slave Trade Throughout the World, Presented to the General Anti-Slavery Convention, Held in London, June, 1840* (London, 1841).

<sup>115</sup> Thomas, Theodore Weld, 175; Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York, 2005), 332n36; Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge, 2003), 158-159. At the time, Thome had been forced to flee Oberlin after he had assisted a self-emancipating slave in her escape from Kentucky to Canada. It would be some time before Thome felt safe enough to return to Ohio, and he welcomed whatever employment he could find during his time as a fugitive. See James A. Thome to Charles Grandison Finney, February 3, 1840, Charles Grandison Finney papers, Microfilm, OCA.

In addition to his work with Theodore Weld, Thome collaborated with Horace Kimball, his traveling companion to the West Indies, on *Emancipation in the West Indies*, an extremely influential book that demonstrated the practicality, efficiency, and safety of immediate emancipation.<sup>116</sup> After exhausting himself as one of the first and most active of the American Anti-Slavery Society lecturing agents in the mid 1830s, Thome struggled for months with serious throat ailments and extreme fatigue. The A.A.S.S. leadership badly wanted to include Thome among the “seventy” lecturing phalanx, but officials feared that the demanding work might result in the loss of Thome’s powerful voice or even “induce pulmonary consumption terminating in death.”<sup>117</sup> Still, fellow Oberlin alumnus and A.A.S.S. executive Sereno Streeter could not allow that such a powerful advocate be lost to disability. On Streeter’s recommendations, the Society decided to send Thome to the West Indies, thought to be a much healthier climate where his influential pen rather than his voice would be put to good use. “The wounded soldier must prepare ammunition for those who can fight,” Streeter wrote, and Thome’s voice from the Caribbean would be “a most powerful auxiliary in advancing the cause of emancipation by collecting and transmitting facts.”<sup>118</sup>

Horace Kimball, it seems, was in worse shape than Thome. Though only in his mid-20s, he was ill most of the voyage, and finally succumbed to tuberculosis in 1838.<sup>119</sup> Thus, Thome shouldered most of the burden of turning their observations

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<sup>116</sup> Lewis Tappan to Henry Clay, June 5, 1838, in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol.9, ed. Robert Seager (Lexington, 1988), 199-200; Edward Everett to Edmund Quincy, April 29, 1838, in *The Friend* Vol.XI, No.33, (May, 1838), 263; *Philanthropist*, May 16, 1838; Goodell, *Slavery and Anti-Slavery*, 374-375; *Boston Quarterly Review*, Vol.1, No.3 (July, 1838), 385-386.

<sup>117</sup> James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, July 16, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I:312-315; Sereno W. Streeter to Theodore Dwight Weld, July 20, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 315-317.

<sup>118</sup> Sereno W. Streeter to Theodore Dwight Weld, July 20, 1836, *Weld Letters*, I: 315-317.

<sup>119</sup> Thome and Kimball, *Emancipation in the West Indies*, v; Johnson, *William Lloyd Garrison and His Times*, 301; *The (London) Christian Reformer*, No.LXI, Vol.VI (January, 1839), 60; *Liberator*, May 4, 1838.

and interviews with Caribbean missionaries, public officials, and former slaves into a nearly one thousand page manuscript.<sup>120</sup> He hoped that his work would break the silence which the largely pro-slavery press of the United States had attempted to maintain regarding the results of British emancipation, the episode Thome described as the “great experiment of freedom.”<sup>121</sup> His illumination of the emancipation example in the British Caribbean was a valuable and revolutionary tool in the efforts to convert those wary of the effects of immediate emancipation. Henry B. Stanton believed the book contained “truth enough to convert the whole nation,” and Weld credited Thome’s work with having advanced the antislavery cause more than any other literary effort published in the United States to that point.<sup>122</sup> Demand for the book was so intense that the twenty five hundred copies of the first edition were quickly snatched up, and the A.A.S.S. contracted for the printing of a second edition of one hundred thousand copied later in 1838.<sup>123</sup>

Thome had contributed solid evidence which would modify the official American Anti-Slavery Society immediatist doctrine. The more timid policy of “immediate emancipation, gradually accomplished” could be dismissed in the light of the British example as illuminated by Thome. Apprenticeship, he suggested, would not work in America because of the intransigence of the former masters. However, no such system would even be necessary in the first place, since the British example offered clear proof that emancipated slaves were both capable and willing to work for

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<sup>120</sup> James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, November 30, 1837, December 25, 1837, *Weld Letters*, I:483-484, 501-504; Theodore Dwight Weld to James G. Birney, February 14, 1838, *Birney Letters*, I: 453-454; Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters From South Carolina: Pioneers for Women’s Rights and Abolition* (New York, 1998), 162. Weld would edit the manuscript to a more manageable 128 closely printed pages.

<sup>121</sup> Thome and Kimball, *Emancipation in the West Indies*, iii-iv.

<sup>122</sup> Henry B. Stanton to Henry Cowles, June 20, 1838, Henry Cowles papers, RG 30/27, Box 1, OCA; Lesick, *The Lane Rebels*, 184; See also “W” to Gamaliel Bailey, n.d., *Philanthropist*, May 22, 1838, where the writer asserts that the book “will abolitionized the world” and “remove all objections but such as spring from negro-prejudice.”

<sup>123</sup> Angelina Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld, April 7, 1838, *Weld Letters*, II: 623-8; Thomas, *Theodore Weld*, 128.



wages, not to mention the fact that free labor was considerably more cost-efficient than slave. Likewise, the plan demonstrated in the Caribbean assuaged the doubts of many who timidly believed that immediate emancipation in the United States was a reckless proposition.<sup>124</sup> Gamaliel Bailey cited Thome's work to support a new immediatist plan wherein an emancipation act would be passed, "slavery is abolished; free laborers take the place of the slaves; and all the difficulties involved in the perplexing processes of gradualism and colonization are avoided."<sup>125</sup>

The growing emphasis that was being placed upon antislavery petitions and memorials, supported by the growing body of antislavery literature abolitionists were producing, made the need for lecturing agents less urgent. In their wake, lecturers often left considerable numbers of genuine antislavery converts, and they always left abolitionist literature.<sup>126</sup> Once a town had been abolitionized and a particular agent had moved on, a clutch of books by Thome or Weld put into the right hands served nearly the same purpose as the presence of an actual agent. The best of the antislavery literature well explained the doctrines of abolitionism. Though nothing completely took the place of on-site lecturers, these "anti-slavery libraries" were useful in keeping a locality's abolitionism at a fever-pitch when lecturers were not immediately available.<sup>127</sup> The petitioning process also gradually became a local, grassroots endeavor, with community organizers able to manage the process from start to finish.

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<sup>124</sup> Goodell, *Slavery and Anti-Slavery*, 376; See also Elizabeth Heyrick, *Immediate, Not Gradual Abolition, or, An Inquiry Into the Shortest, Safest, and Most Effectual Means of Getting Rid of West Indian Slavery* (Boston, 1838). This pamphlet was originally published in England in 1824, but republished shortly after *Emancipation in the West Indies*, and contained many of the same arguments.

<sup>125</sup> *Philanthropist*, April 24, 1838; Barnes, *The Anti-Slavery Impulse*, 138-139; Thomas, *Theodore Weld*, 128. Thome would also later contribute to and assist Weld in the preparation of two other important contributions to the antislavery library, *Slavery as It Is* (New York, 1839), and *Slavery and the Internal Slave Trade in the United States of North America* (London, 1841).

<sup>126</sup> *Philanthropist*, June 9, October 13, 1837, February 13, May 22, July 3, 1838; *Friend of Man*, March 15, 1838.

<sup>127</sup> *Philanthropist*, July 3, 1838.

As abolitionists nationwide shifted their efforts to blanketing policymakers with antislavery petitions, Oberlin also sent less agents into the field as officials of the American Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>128</sup> Some historians have accepted this fact as proof of waning abolitionist zeal in Oberlin, but nothing could be further from the case.<sup>129</sup> The national society itself was sending drastically less lecturers into the field in the late 1830s and concentrating its greatest efforts on the petition campaign. This did not mean that Oberlin students, faculty, and residents did not continue to travel throughout the free states lecturing on behalf of abolition. They undertook antislavery pamphleteering in addition to their continued, enthusiastic speaking efforts. Indeed, one critic of Oberlin wrote in 1837 that female students “soon learn[ed] to give her decided preference and attention to the young man who may have proved himself an abolitionist of the deepest dye,” and if by chance he had been “so fortunate as to have received a cow-hiding or coat of rotten eggs, he becomes indeed an object of their highest adoration.”<sup>130</sup>

The shift to petitioning was a fortuitous development. After the financial collapse of 1837, the national society could simply no longer support its army of agents. Now, it was imperative to abolitionists from Oberlin that “every man and woman must be an agent” to “make the most of our abolitionism by bringing it all into

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<sup>128</sup> See Amos Dresser to Levi Burrell, November 29, 1837, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 4, OCA; *Philanthropist*, February 3, 22, March 10, 27, 1840.

<sup>129</sup> See Clayton S. Ellsworth, “Oberlin and the Anti-Slavery Movement Up to the Civil War,” PhD diss, Cornell University (1930), 40-41; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 252; Keith Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer* (Syracuse, 1987), 364; Gary Wills, *Head and Heart: American Christianities* (New York, 2007), 317; William G. McLaughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York, 1959), 111.

<sup>130</sup> Delazon Smith, *Oberlin Unmasked; A History of Oberlin, or New Lights of the West: Embracing the Conduct and Character of the Officers and Students of the Institution; Together with the Colonists, From the Founding of the Institution* (Cleveland, 1837), 28. It was expected that most Oberlin abolitionists would not indefinitely delay their educations by accepting open-ended agencies. Even Weld assumed that they would concentrate their lecturing efforts on the period of their winter breaks before returning to school in the spring. See Theodore Dwight Weld to James G. Birney, December 19, 1835, January 5, 1836, *Birney Letters*, I: 283-286.; James G. Birney to Lewis Tappan, April 29, 1836, *Birney Letters*, I: 318-322.

use.”<sup>131</sup> Statistics of the petitioning efforts after 1837 demonstrate that abolitionists on the local level rose to the challenge. In 1838, the American Anti-Slavery Society forwarded petitions to Congress bearing over four hundred thousand names. By 1840, more than two million men and women had signed antislavery memorials that made it to Washington. Moreover, a lion’s share of the petitioning labor was done by women, whose involvement tripled the number of petition names secured previously by paid male agents.<sup>132</sup>

As the ranks of salaried agents thinned, abolitionists asserted that “nothing can be made a substitute” for the “*neighborhood influence*” local petitioners offered in their door-to-door canvasses.<sup>133</sup> Indeed, the unsung heroes of the late 1830s were local antislavery workers who went to places where editors and busy lecturers could not.<sup>134</sup> Since petitioning had become the primary method of agitation by most abolitionists, the local nature of the endeavor was quickly making central authority unnecessary. Once a town had been visited by an antislavery agent or two, anyone could quickly master the skill of petition circulating, especially since they were often armed with an array of supporting abolitionist literature and since most petitions were of a simple, similar form and printed locally.<sup>135</sup> After being shown the way, local centers of abolitionism were more than capable of sustaining themselves. Moreover, antislavery petitions were increasingly being sent directly to Congress, bypassing central Society offices, since there was no postage charged on constituents’

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<sup>131</sup> George Whipple to Levi Burnell, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 2, OCA; Barnes, *The Anti-Slavery Impulse*, 145.

<sup>132</sup> Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill, 1998), 87-88.

<sup>133</sup> *Friend of Man*, September 27, 1837.

<sup>134</sup> Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship*, 208n5.

<sup>135</sup> *Register of Debates in Congress, Comprising the Leading Debates and Incidents of the First Session of the Twenty Fourth Congress*, Vol.XII (Washington, D.C., 1836), 834; See, for example, *Address of the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia, to the Women of Pennsylvania : With the Form of a Petition to the Congress of the U. States* (Philadelphia, 1836), 8; *Friend of Man*, December 1, 1836; *Philanthropist*, March 25, 1836.

correspondence with their representatives.<sup>136</sup> It seemed to many as if the American Anti-Slavery Society was becoming a victim of one of its chief successes.<sup>137</sup>

As state and county auxiliaries began to shoulder the burden of organization, they also increasingly came into conflict with the national society over financial matters. Local societies were becoming self-sufficient and self-contained. Many had their own newspapers, agents in the field, and central offices, and often, their own independent agendas for antislavery agitation. As abolitionism became localized, abolitionists began to balk at arrangements that bled their precious resources from their own community. The national society attempted to curtail these defections in 1837 by requiring state auxiliaries to pledge a definite amount, to either be collected in that state either by national agents or directly paid from the state societies' treasuries.<sup>138</sup> However, state contributions were slow in coming that year, and the societies also objected to the intrusions of national agents into their fields of influence. At the national anniversary meeting in 1838, the states managed to push through a resolution that barred all American Anti-Slavery Society financial agents, unless acting in cooperation with the local organization, from their borders, leaving the national society dependent on the payments of individual pledges that were becoming fewer and farther between.<sup>139</sup> In the year following the 1838 convention, not a single

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<sup>136</sup> (Philadelphia) *Niles National Register*, August 23, 1843; Donald C. Bacon, Roger H. Davidson, Morton Keller, *The Encyclopedia of the United States Congress*, Vol.2 (New York, 1995), 884-885; Barnes, *The Anti-Slavery Appeal*, 146.

<sup>137</sup> *Philanthropist*, September 29, 1837; Ronald Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism After 1830* (Baltimore, 1976), 5. Even some of the larger regional societies felt the effects of this tendency toward decentralization. At the 1837 anniversary meeting of the Western Reserve Anti-Slavery Society in Oberlin, the Society dissolved itself in favor of two county societies for Lorain and Portage Counties. These societies would meet yearly at the anniversaries of Oberlin and Western Reserve Colleges as the WRASS had formerly done.

<sup>138</sup> *Friend of Man*, May 31, 1837.

<sup>139</sup> *Friend of Man*, May 16, 1838; *Liberator*, May 18, 1838; Wendell Phillips Garrison and Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of His Life Told by His Children*, Vol.2 (New York, 1885), 261.

state auxiliary met its annual pledge, and some were not paid at all.<sup>140</sup> Moreover, some members of the Executive Committee, once the financial bedrock of the society, suffered massive individual losses in the financial crash of 1837. President Arthur Tappan went bankrupt that year, and with his riches also went his practical influence in the organization.<sup>141</sup> By 1839, the American Anti-Slavery Society could not count on even its most generous benefactors to sustain it, and reigning in the independent-minded state societies seemed equally hopeless.<sup>142</sup>

### ***A BULWARK AGAINST HUMAN BONDAGE***

Oberlin was struggling financially as well. The school had always been supported almost exclusively by the philanthropic donations of American abolitionists. By the late 1830s, however, they sat fifty thousand dollars in debt, and did not even have funds enough to support the faculty.<sup>143</sup> And, just as the American Anti-Slavery Society was suffering from Arthur Tappan's financial ruin, so too did Oberlin, to whom he had pledged thousands of dollars every year. The most he was able to do after the crash was to cancel any outstanding notes he may have held against the school.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Francis Jackson to William Lloyd Garrison, March 30, 1839, in *Eighth Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Mass. Anti-Slavery Society, Presented January 22, 1840* (Boston, 1840), 24-26; Ellis Gray Loring to James G. Birney, February 16, 1839, *Birney Letters*, I: 483-484; Barnes, *The Anti-Slavery Impulse*, 151, 268-269n13.

<sup>141</sup> Lyman A. Spaulding to Levi Burnell, May 9, 1837, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 4, OCA; Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan*, 170-181.

<sup>142</sup> Elizur Wright, Jr. to Theodore Dwight Weld, November 4, 1836, *Weld Letters*, 346-348; George Whipple to Levi Burnell, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 2, OCA; Henry B. Stanton to Henry Cowles, June 20, 1838, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 18, OCA.

<sup>143</sup> Finney, *Memoirs*, 381; John J. Shipherd to Levi Burnell, October 12, 1836, February 24, 1838, RG 30/24, FP, Box 14, Folder 6, OCA; "Prof[essorship] fund Installments, 1836" n.d., RG 30/24, FP, Box 11, Folder 20, OCA; Joshua Gidings to Levi Burnell, January 19, 1838, RG 30/24, FP, Box 14, Folder 1, OCA; Leavitt, Lord, & Co. to The Oberlin Institute, April 12, June 1, 1837, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 4, OCA; William Dawes to Levi Burnell, April 12, 1837, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 4, OCA; John S. Hudson to "Gillett," April 19, 1837, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 4, OCA.

<sup>144</sup> Finney, *Memoirs*, 387-388; Alfred Smith to Levi Burnell, May 12, 1837, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 4, OCA; "Prof[essorship] fund Installments, 1836" n.d., RG 30/24, FP,

Still, abolitionists across the country agreed that the Oberlin Institute seemed to be weathering the financial storm better than most abolitionist strongholds.<sup>145</sup> The school's administration as well as its traveling agents put their faith in God to provide, and as it always had, Oberlin refused to fold.<sup>146</sup> John Keep wrote to Levi Burnell urging him to tell the faculty to "hold up good courage—hold on—We will not give up the ship. If *possible*, they shall have their bread—& when on trial it shall appear that the means *cannot be had* then, & not till then, shall we say, God calls us to shepherd our school."<sup>147</sup> President Mahan and the trustees even proposed that the faculty work on a "faith mission" concept of dividing in appropriate amounts whatever funds agents were able to collect.<sup>148</sup>

The school's officials also refused to transform its mission into one big fund-raising drive. With God as their guarantor, Oberlin representatives went out in the dark years of the late 1830s to do just what they always had done best: oversee revivals and preach the antislavery gospel.<sup>149</sup> Some of its most successful earners were those who went about their normal business and let the finances take care of themselves. Thus Charles Grandison Finney's itinerant preaching that year not only helped spread the Oberlin message, but also resulted in significant donations to his

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Box 11, Folder 20, OCA; John J. Shipherd to Levi Burnell, October 12, 1836, February 24, 1838, RG 30/24, FP, Box 14, Folder 6, OCA; Arthur Tappan to Levi Burnell, October 15, 22, 1836, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 3, OCA; L.A. Spaulding to Levi Burnell, May 9, 1837, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 4, OCA.

<sup>145</sup> Amos Dresser to Levi Burnell, March 26, 1838, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 5, OCA.

<sup>146</sup> "If our enterprise is not of God," John Keep remarked, "it must fail." John Keep to Asa Mahan, Charles Grandison Finney, John Morgan, and J.H. Cowles, July 1, 1836, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 11, OCA; See also Finney, *Memoirs*, 387-388; L.W. Hamlin to Levi Burnell, December 13, 1838, RG 30/24, FP, Box 14, Folder 2, OCA.

<sup>147</sup> John Keep to Levi Burnell, May 29, 1837, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 4, OCA.

<sup>148</sup> Madden and Hamilton, *Freedom and Grace*, 75.

<sup>149</sup> See *Cleveland Liberalist*, June 24, 1837.

institution, and agents who lectured in hostile territory produced tangible results even when they “said nothing about money.”<sup>150</sup>

Even with strained resources, the Oberlin community remained alert to the importance of continued vigilance. Despite the fact that the antislavery movement seemed to be “paralyzed for want of funds,” the *Oberlin Evangelist* reminded abolitionists that “Slavery is still the same sin against God—its horrors are the same—the majority of our citizens still manifest a determined hostility to the principles of liberty—the churches still close their ears at the cry of the needy—the Congress of the U.S. and the Legislature of Ohio, yet trample down the suffering and the dumb.” The financial downturn had not lessened the suffering of the slaves, and the abolitionists of Oberlin believed that worldly considerations should have no effect on the biblical injunction to “*remember them that are in bonds as bound with them*” or to “do to others as we would have them do to us.”<sup>151</sup>

In the immediate financial crisis, and even amidst ideological battles that were destroying the national society from within, the Oberlin Institute and community became a powerful symbolic standard around which abolitionists could rally. When Oberlin commissioned William Dawes and John Keep in late 1839 to make a last ditch appeal to English philanthropists for the survival of their college, American reformers of all backgrounds joined together and enthusiastically offered their support. Amasa Walker wrote to English abolitionist George Thompson that the “Oberlin Institute is beloved by all those of every denomination who love Geo. Thompson and W. Lloyd Garrison, & is hated deeply & sincerely by all those ‘gentlemen of property and

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<sup>150</sup> Amos Dresser to Levi Burnell, March 26, 1838, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 5, OCA; John Hudson to Levi Burnell, December 22, 1838, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 5, OCA; Finney, *Memoirs*, 388.

<sup>151</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 8, 1839.

standing.’”<sup>152</sup> Philadelphia Garrisonian James Forten commended the Oberlin Institute’s color-blind admissions policy in glowing terms to an English correspondent, while reformer Dr. Sylvester Graham wrote to Londoner Peter Roget that Oberlin was “perhaps more closely associated with all the best interests of intellectual & moral men, & the highest hopes of the human family than any other literary institution in our country.”<sup>153</sup> Garrison’s friend Elizabeth Pease declared to an English correspondent that “The [Oberlin] Institute may be almost considered a nursery for Abolitionists.”<sup>154</sup> Lewis Tappan assured George Thompson that the school had “the entire confidence of Abolitionists throughout the country. It is a nursery of Anti-Slavery Lecturers, Agents, & Preachers.”<sup>155</sup>

Theodore Dwight Weld drafted a circular to present Oberlin’s cause to the world, and in it, he encapsulated their vital contributions to abolitionism and American reform. Thirty six abolitionist leaders as diverse as the Tappans, Garrison, Angelina Grimké Weld, James G. Birney, John Greenleaf Whittier, Gerrit Smith, Samuel Cornish, Maria Weston Chapman, Wendell Phillips, Robert Purvis, Alvan Stewart, and Joshua Giddings endorsed Weld’s appeal. In doing so, American abolitionists put aside their mounting sectarianism and united behind Oberlin’s role as an antislavery institution, a bulwark against human bondage. The appeal’s introduction read in part:

In all its features, this Institution is opposed to Slavery; and is a practical and standing exhibition of the great doctrine of immediate emancipation, producing its legitimate and beneficial results; youth are admitted to all its privileges, without regard to colour, or nation, and

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<sup>152</sup> Amasa Walker to George Thompson, April 19, 1839, RG 30/250, MP, accession 1995/142, Box 1, OCA.

<sup>153</sup> James Forten to James Riley, November 26, 1839, RG 30/250, MP, accession 1995/142, Box 1, OCA; Sylvester Graham to Peter M. Roget, n.d., RG 30/250, MP, accession 1995/142, Box 1, OCA.

<sup>154</sup> Elizabeth Pease to Rachel Savoriry, n.d. (1839), RG 30/250, MP, accession 1995/142, Box 1, OCA.

<sup>155</sup> Lewis Tappan to George Thompson, May 14, 1839, RG 30/250, MP, accession 1995/142, Box 1, OCA.



there is a department for the instruction of females. It is thoroughly evangelical in its spirit and character, is free from all sectarian partialities, discards the prejudice of caste in all its various and disgraceful forms, and has already become a terror to the slaveholder, and a shield and a solace to the victim of the white man's tyranny. By uniting the youth of all colours in the same course of academical training, it furnishes a practical method of elevating the African race, of abolishing the tyranny of caste, and of operating an effectual door through which the black and the free-coloured man may attain the rights of citizenship, and the blessings of a quiet and protected home.<sup>156</sup>

The "Appeal" praised the effects of Oberlin's manual labor system, as well as the school's self-sacrificing cadre of abolitionist professors and students who had "excited not only the bitter hostility of the upholders of slavery, but also a large proportion of the professing church." Though "called to pecuniary sacrifices, such as modern times have rarely witnessed," the abolitionist men and women of Oberlin were driven on by "a solemn conviction of duty towards God and their fellow-men." Weld reverentially asserted that "their acts will stand out in the history of a progressive benevolence, as a pattern for the church's imitation."<sup>157</sup>

This was no small praise from perhaps the ablest abolitionist to trek a lecture circuit in the 1830s, yet many of the esteemed abolitionists who endorsed Weld's plea felt further compelled to write their own testimonial of support to be carried throughout England by the Oberlin deputation. They wrote that they felt "solemnly moved by duty, and sweetly constrained by love to the truth, and honour in its faithful

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<sup>156</sup> "An Appeal on Behalf of the Oberlin Institute," in Harriett Martineau, *The Martyr Age of the United States of America, With an Appeal on Behalf of the Oberlin Institute, in Aid of the Abolition of Slavery* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, 1840), vi; See also "History of the Financial Support of the College," *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, Vol.IV, No.9 (June, 1908), 346.

<sup>157</sup> "An Appeal on Behalf of the Oberlin Institute," vii-viii.

avowal,” to give their “emphatic testimony in favour of the Oberlin Institute.” They praised “the spirit that pervades the Institution,” and wrote of “the mighty influence, young as it is, which it is already putting forth.” The Oberlin Institute, they wrote, was “accomplishing more for freedom of thought, speech, and conscience, more for the great cause of human liberty and equal rights, the annihilation of prejudice and caste in every form—more to honour God, to exalt his Truth, and to purify a corrupt church and ministry, than any other Institution in the United States.”<sup>158</sup>

Thus while the American Anti-Slavery Society was quickly becoming a shell organization which was short not only on funds, but also on authority and on internal ideological cohesion, men and women on both sides of the Atlantic looked to Oberlin as the pride and hope of American abolitionism. The efforts of an army of Western abolitionists had proven their home region to be the new antislavery foundation of the Union. At the head of this Western power was Ohio, with members of the Oberlin community leading the way. Their deliberate independence and determination had allowed them to craft an abolitionism that, though not the most publicized, promised to appeal to the most potential converts and offer the most practical hope of the eradication of slavery from the United States. As quarrelling Eastern abolitionists retained the spotlight in the last years of the decade, abolitionists from Oberlin continued to exert a quiet though crucial influence over the national movement. As it always had and would continue to do, this small Ohio town and its college remained in the vanguard of abolitionism, and resembled in detail what the larger movement would eventually approximate: non sectarian and accepting of whatever seemed most likely to win the day.

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<sup>158</sup> “An Appeal on Behalf of the Oberlin Institute,”. ix.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *“A hot-bed of abolitionism”*

In 1837, a disgruntled expelled student described Oberlin’s isolated setting as a place that “presents no inducements to the student, that man of all others, whose soaring mind delights in picturesque and diversified scenery.” He depicted the town as a “mud-hole, frog-pond, mortar-bed, swamp,” so remote that he could not fathom why otherwise intelligent students continued to flock to such an “impolitic and very unnatural location.”<sup>1</sup> In his old age, Charles Grandison Finney also recalled that during the Oberlin’s infancy, the community was mired in the midst of the wilderness. He pronounced the placement of the settlement as “unfortunate, ill-considered, hastily decided upon; and had it not been for the good hand of God in helping us at every step, the institution would have been a failure because of its ill-judged location.”<sup>2</sup>

However, James Fairchild, Oberlin alumnus, professor, and college president after Finney’s retirement in 1866, remembered Oberlin’s peculiar site quite differently. Echoing the philosophy of the community’s founders, Fairchild wrote during the college’s fiftieth anniversary celebration that upon closer consideration, it was not difficult to appreciate that Oberlin had developed in the best location possible. As for its isolation, he believed that “the result must be accepted as a vindication. The desirable thing was to secure a community around the college in general sympathy with its educational work, and with little attraction for other interests which might bring in undesirable influences.” As he considered the half century of unprecedented

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<sup>1</sup> Delazon Smith, *Oberlin Unmasked; A History of Oberlin, or New Lights of the West: Embracing the Conduct and Character of the Officers and Students of the Institution; Together with the Colonists, From the Founding of the Institution* (Cleveland, 1837), 5-6. Smith was expelled for his public declarations of atheism.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Grandison Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*, ed. Garth Rosell and Richard A.G. DuPuis (Grand Rapids, 1989), 386.

intellectual ferment and reform agitation that Oberlin had produced, Fairchild concluded that “To a great extent the world has yielded the Oberlin tract to the uses for which it was selected and consecrated.”<sup>3</sup>

Alone in the Ohio wilderness and with a community firmly united in their missionary enterprise, Oberlin was a place, unlike any other in America, where free discussion and legitimately open debate were allowed and encouraged. It was a singular community where ideas that otherwise would have to be more carefully stated, if discussed at all, and that were likely to be negatively received elsewhere, could be expressed and debated with complete freedom. The Lane Rebels had insisted upon this guarantee in 1834, and it was also the principal demand of Charles Finney, Asa Mahan, and John Morgan before they agreed to sign on to the Oberlin project. Here, there was no need to shock an audience’s sensibilities to be heard, and neither was there the need to adhere to narrow and limited definitions of various outsiders’ notions of what it meant to be a “true” abolitionist.

“Students here are encouraged to search for truth,” a group of Oberlin student-abolitionists wrote in 1839, “& to receive no doctrine simply because it is supported by great names, & to reject not simply because it lacks such support.”<sup>4</sup> The Oberlin community attracted and welcomed all abolitionists of all backgrounds into its fellowship. Together, they calmly and methodically worked through the most vexing questions before the antislavery movement, discussions that often ended in a riot elsewhere. The most distinguished abolitionists in America went out of their way to visit Oberlin, and as one alumna remembered, the community welcomed all reformers on the understanding “that their theories must stand the test of open and free

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<sup>3</sup> James H. Fairchild, “The Divine Hand in the Oberlin Enterprise,” (Oberlin) *Jubilee Notes* (November, 1883), 48.

<sup>4</sup> Hiram Elams, H.C. Taylor, and M.E. Strieby to John Keep and William Dawes, May 11, 1839, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 6, Oberlin College Archives (hereafter OCA).

discussion.” “Oberlin,” she concluded, “would prove all things and hold fast only that which was good.”<sup>5</sup>

### **“PRACTICAL ABOLITIONISM”**

In few places besides Oberlin could one find such a motley assortment of men and women who were so able and willing to collaborate on the development of antislavery strategy. Oberlin’s community included the children of Quakers and slaveholders, former slaves, political organizers, nonresistants, and radical Garrisonians, yet no one was denied a seat at the debate table. Visitors to Oberlin were commonly invited to participate in the Oberlin Institute’s cross-question classes.<sup>6</sup> Even Stephen S. Foster, a radical Garrisonian described by one historian as “undoubtedly the most aggressive and humorless reformer ever to grace the antislavery stage,” and author of the book *The Brotherhood of Thieves; or, A True Picture of the American Church and Clergy*, was allowed to speak his mind in Oberlin on multiple visits.<sup>7</sup> Despite Foster’s assurances during one visit that the Oberlin church was connected to the Southern slaveholders’ churches in a single unbroken “covenant of Hell,” President Asa Mahan welcomed the debate that took up the evenings of a full October week in 1846 before huge audiences in the college chapel.<sup>8</sup> Formal discussions of issues such as the “effect of slavery upon the free people of the north,” “Would it be the duty of Abolitionists to join the colored people in case of an

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<sup>5</sup> A.A.F. Johnson, “Significant Events and Noted Persons,” *The Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, Vol.VI, No.2 (November, 1909), 52; See also Hiram Elams, H.C. Taylor, and M.E. Strieby to John Keep and William Dawes, May 11, 1839, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 6, OCA.

<sup>6</sup> Journal of William Henry Brisbane, October 7-15, 1856, William Henry Brisbane papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, microfilm roll 1; Caroline H. Dall, *The College, the Market, and the Court; or, Woman's Relation to Education, Labor, and Law* (Boston, 1868), 386.

<sup>7</sup> John L. Thomas, *The Liberator: William Lloyd Garrison* (Boston, 1963), 321.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen S. Foster, *The Brotherhood of Thieves; or, A True Picture of the American Church and Clergy: A Letter to Nathaniel Barney, of Nantucket* (Boston, 1844); William Greeley Burroughs, “Oberlin’s Part in the Slavery Conflict,” *Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, Vol.XX (January, 1911), 280; James H. Fairchild, *Oberlin: The Colony and the College, 1833-1883* (Oberlin, 1883), 85-86.

insurrection,” “Would it be practible [sic] to extend the right of suffrage to the colored man of this nation, were they all emancipated,” and “the proper sphere of woman” augmented the innumerable private debates that all combined to produce a coherent, well-planned, and practical abolitionist ideology.<sup>9</sup>

Oberlinites had always felt that they inhabited a city on a hill. They did not ignore the requirements of an abolitionist movement that needed strong leaders and a workable antislavery ideology. As the state and local antislavery societies accepted a large degree of the burden of organization and administration from the decentralizing American Anti-Slavery Society, members of the Oberlin community continued to guide the Ohio contingent. Their leadership at the inaugural Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society convention in Putnam in 1835 had brought the Oberlin Institute and community the approbation of the antislavery establishment, and as the establishment itself waned in influence, the Oberlin community lived up to its billing as one of the great hopes of antislavery in the Ohio conventions of the late 1830s.<sup>10</sup> There, they unveiled and elaborated ideas that they had meticulously developed in their isolation. Quite often, other abolitionists took them up as their own to share with the nation.

The abolitionist vanguard coming out of Oberlin was diligent in their adherence to Charles Grandison Finney’s injunction to always back up words with deeds. As many of them had at Lane Seminary, they continued in their efforts at “practical abolitionism” by serving as teachers of Northern African Americans, especially former slaves. The Oberlin Institute system hoped to demonstrate to a largely-racist nation that African American students could be educated just as well as

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<sup>9</sup> See Minutes of the Oberlin Dialectical Association, 1839-1845, RG 30/24, Robert S. Fletcher papers (hereafter FP), Box 11, Folder 15, OCA. In a sense, everyone in Oberlin was a member of one of America’s original think tanks. Their importance thus lies not in their absolute numbers, which were relatively small, but in their ability to generate an ideology and plan of action which would be followed by countless others in the movement.

<sup>10</sup> See Harriett Martineau, *The Martyr Age of the United States of America, With an Appeal on Behalf of the Oberlin Institute, in Aid of the Abolition of Slavery* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, 1840), xiv.

their white counterparts. They became unassailable proof that the slaves of the South were intellectually prepared for their complete and immediate emancipation from bondage. “Every candid mind,” the *Oberlin Evangelist* reported, “must see that the degradation of the colored man at the north is one of the strongest bulwarks of slavery at the south.” The editor identified the most common justification “of the negro-hater, whether found in the northern apologist or southern slaveholder,” in support of slavery as the natural condition of African Americans, most of whom were barred from educational opportunities because of an assumed intellectual capacity.<sup>11</sup> The inevitable contrasts that Southern visitors would be forced to make between educated free African Americans in the North and the “degraded” slaves of the South would help “burn slavery out by the roots.”<sup>12</sup> To that end, Oberlin abolitionists supported a plan to supply every settlement in the state containing a significant number of Black residents with a teacher.<sup>13</sup>

Each winter, dozens of Oberlin students would spend their only break of the year teaching in schools across the region. They looked especially for opportunities to head up a school for young African American scholars. By the fall of 1840, Oberlin could boast that at least 39 of its most accomplished and able students were engaged in teaching at such academies. Few of these tutors received any compensation for their efforts beyond the necessities of room and board. To support themselves, they were often forced to also lead evening classes at local schools for white children after their African American students went home.<sup>14</sup> Correspondents to the *Philanthropist* in

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<sup>11</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, November 4, 1840.

<sup>12</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to Lewis Tappan, February 22, 1836, *The Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld, and Sara Grimké, 1822-1844*, Vol.I, ed. Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. DuMond (New York, 1934), 262-265; John J. Shipherd, “pastoral letter,” January 27, 1835, in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, “Appendix,” 337-346.

<sup>13</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, November 4, 1840.

<sup>14</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 23, 1840; *Philanthropist*, November 14, 1837; See also Dall, *The College, the Market, and the Court*, 385.

Cincinnati advised their readers that schools for African American students who sought qualified and dedicated teachers should make their applications directly to Oberlin.<sup>15</sup> Oberlin Institute would then send out zealous student-educators who possessed the “firmness compounded with much enthusiasm” necessary to lead these academies.<sup>16</sup>

Augustus Wattles and Amzi Barber, Lane Rebel and Oberlin alumnus, respectively, served as general agents of the Ohio Ladies’ Society for the Education of Free People of Color through the 1840s, and they often noted the frustrations that many of these Oberlin student-teachers faced.<sup>17</sup> One young man built with his own hands the schoolhouse for his fifty scholars, mostly former slaves, in Brown County, Ohio. He felt the need to sleep in the building all winter for fear that local whites would burn it. A derisively designated “amalgamation school” in Pike County was led by an Oberlin woman who was threatened with tar and feathers by a drunken “cut throat” mob if she did not abandon her efforts.<sup>18</sup> George Vashon, Oberlin scholar and son of a prominent Pittsburgh African American family, remained faithfully at his own Pike County teaching post, even after all but four Black families had been forcefully driven away and his schoolhouse vandalized and eventually burned to the ground.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the most notable of these Oberlin-trained teachers was Hiram Wilson, a former Lane Rebel and member of the American Anti-Slavery Society’s “seventy” lecturing phalanx. Wilson could not endure delaying the commencement of his

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<sup>15</sup> *Philanthropist*, October 20, 1841.

<sup>16</sup> Augustus Wattles to Henry Cowles, September 14, 1837, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 12, OCA.

<sup>17</sup> This society included the wives of many prominent Oberlin abolitionists including Mrs. Henry Cowles, Mrs. James Dascomb, Mrs. John Keep, and Mrs. Asa Mahan. See *Philanthropist*, June 23, 1840, June 9, 1841, June 29, 1842, August 9, 1843; Augustus Wattles to Henry Cowles, September 14, 1837, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 12, OCA.

<sup>18</sup> *Philanthropist*, December 24, 1839, June 15, 1843; “Annual Report of the Ladies’ Education Society,” in *Philanthropist*, June 22, 1842; Robert S. Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College: From its Foundation Through the Civil War*, Vol.I (Oberlin, 1943), 246-247.

<sup>19</sup> “Annual Report of the Ladies’ Education Society,” in *Philanthropist*, June 22, 1842; See also speech of William Dawes, in *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Glasgow Emancipation Society, Held August 8, 1840* (Glasgow, 1840), 8-9.



greatest “usefulness,” and immediately after completing his theological course at Oberlin with the other Rebels, he left for British Canada with nothing to his name but the gift of twenty five dollars from Charles Grandison Finney. His mission was twofold. Wilson hoped to explore the western province of Canada to determine the needs of its African American population, most of whom had fled there from bondage in the American South. More immediately, his removal from Oberlin was occasioned by the pressing needs of a new friend, a man who had escaped from slavery and made Oberlin one of his last stops on the Underground Railroad from the South. The last leg of his journey would be with Wilson from Oberlin to free British soil. When they arrived in Canada, the men discovered tens of thousands of refugees from slavery who were in desperate need of both material and educational support.<sup>20</sup>

Hiram Wilson would spend the rest of his life working among the Black residents of Canada West. With the help of other Oberlin students, he hoped to found a series of schools in the Afro-Canadian communities.<sup>21</sup> His greatest desire was to establish a manual labor school for former slaves patterned after what he had experienced as a student at the Oberlin Institute.<sup>22</sup> His dream was soon realized at the Dawn settlement, where refugees who often suffered at the hands of unscrupulous Canadian whites could learn agricultural methods, mechanical skills, and domestic arts, in addition to receiving a thorough and useful education.<sup>23</sup> Students would labor three to four hours per day in addition to hours of intensive study to properly prepare

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<sup>20</sup> *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles Twitchell Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York, 1991), 116-117.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Hiram Wilson to Hamilton Hill, April 25, 1843, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 8, OCA; Hiram Wilson to Henry Cowles, January 2, 1837, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 18, OCA. Wilson stated that “This institute is not to rival Oberlin or Oneida, but it is necessary because neither of these is safe for the fugitive. Our arms are thrown open...to receive and instruct them, where no tyrant can molest or make them afraid.” See Jacqueline L. Tobin and Hettie Jones, *From Midnight to Dawn: The Last Tracks of the Underground Railroad* (New York, 2007), 25.

<sup>23</sup> Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal, 1997), 179. In 1841, New York abolitionist Gerrit Smith organized a committee in Rochester to collect and channel funds, Bibles, and clothing to Wilson's Canada schools, which numbered at least fifteen by that point.

them to go forth as teachers and abolitionist missionaries. One former slave involved in the project realized that the program Wilson helped establish “would train up those who would afterwards instruct others,” and enable Afro-Canadians to gradually become independent of white Canadians for their intellectual progress and physical prosperity.<sup>24</sup> In 1837, Wilson addressed the first convention of the Upper Canada Anti-Slavery Society on the importance of education for self-emancipated former slaves.<sup>25</sup> He told delegates that he meant Dawn to “bring forth upon the Anti-Slavery battle ground Colored champions who will wage a successful warfare.”<sup>26</sup>

Hiram Wilson could not possibly meet the challenges with which the hundreds of eager students met him by himself. For assistance, he turned to the best place he could think of for empathetic reinforcements: the Oberlin Institute.<sup>27</sup> Within the first five years of his efforts at Dawn, Wilson and his students availed themselves of the services of at least forty three college scholars, most of whom were Oberlinites. Wilson described these students as “good Samaritans” who went out “to bind up the wounds and administer to the comfort of those who have not ‘fallen,’ but unfortunately have been *born* ‘among thieves,’ and fortunately escaped from their selfish grasp.”<sup>28</sup> At least three of his dedicated Oberlin assistants lost their lives to the

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<sup>24</sup> Josiah Henson, *An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson (Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “Uncle Tom”)*, From 1789-1879 (Boston, 1879), 169-170; Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada, Related by Themselves, with an Account of the History and Condition of the Colored Population of Upper Canada* (Boston, 1856), 309-312.

<sup>25</sup> *The Slave’s Narrative*, 116; See also “Upper Canada Anti-Slavery Society,” in *Slavery in America: With Notices of the Present State of Slavery and the Slave Trade Throughout the World*, ed. Thomas Price (London, 1837), 207-208; Will Kaufman and Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, *Britain and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History* (Santa Barbara, 2005), 61.

<sup>26</sup> Hiram Wilson to Hamilton Hill, April 25, 1843, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 8, OCA; Hiram Wilson to Hamilton Hill, June 12, 1845, June 12, 1845, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 9, OCA; Hiram Wilson to Henry Cowles, January 2, 1837, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 18, OCA.

<sup>27</sup> See J.W. Alden to Hiram Wilson, March 23, 1841, RG 30/112, Hiram Wilson Papers, Box 1, OCA; *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 8, 1839; Erastus Childs to Hiram Wilson, October 22, 1841, Hiram Wilson Papers, Box 1, OCA, A.A. Phelps to Henry Cowles, March 8, 1843, RG 30/24, FP, Box 11, Folder 10, OCA.

<sup>28</sup> *Liberator*, September 21, 1838.

fierce Canadian frontier elements. Those that lived to return to Ohio most often did so with empty pockets and severely weathered constitutions.<sup>29</sup>

Closer to home, the Oberlin community also supported efforts to educate fellow townspeople who had spent most or parts of their lives in bondage. Though Oberlin's schools were always open to its African American residents, the influx into the town of self emancipating bondsmen in the late 1830s and early 1840s necessitated the organization of a special school for adults who were just beginning their journey towards literacy.<sup>30</sup> In 1842, the community erected a schoolhouse where those who "were moved by the desire and purpose of elevating themselves educationally and morally," very often elderly heads of households, would be taught by Oberlin Institute students.<sup>31</sup>

The Oberlin "Liberty School" was one of the first things the young John Mercer Langston noticed when he arrived in Oberlin in 1844. He described it as the "Faneuil Hall" of former slaves, "in which the negro made his most eloquent and effective speeches against his enslavement."<sup>32</sup> Oberlin student Lucy Stone was a popular teacher in the school, and the speeches to which Langston referred also moved her with their power.<sup>33</sup> Even after spending all day in intense study, the same group of former slaves would gather in the Liberty schoolhouse again in the evenings to recount the stories of their wrongs in slavery that compelled their escape to the North. Langston recalled few dry eyes among the storytellers or those who listened to their

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<sup>29</sup> *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, July 8, 1841; *Emancipator*, December 22, 1836, March 28, April 6, October 5, 1837; *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 8, 1839.

<sup>30</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 17, 1844.

<sup>31</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 101; Wilbur Greeley Burroughs, "Oberlin's Part in the Slavery Conflict," *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, Vol.XX (1911), 279.

<sup>32</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 101. Faneuil Hall is a meeting house in Boston famous for the many patriotic speeches by the founding fathers as well as abolitionist speeches, rallies, and other reform conventions in the nineteenth century.

<sup>33</sup> See "Lydia" to Hannah Warner, n.d., (1845), RG 30/24, FP, Box 3, Folder 15, OCA; *Old Anti-Slavery Days: Proceedings of the Commemorative Meeting, Held by the Danvers Historical Society, at the Town Hall, Danvers, April 26, 1893, with Introduction, Letters, and Sketches* (Danvers, 1893), 113.

tales of woe.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, it was the testimony of Lucy Stone's formerly enslaved students that most inspired her to continue to battle for emancipation after her graduation from the Oberlin Institute in 1847.

Yet a life in bondage left deep psychological scars. One of Stone's pupils in the Liberty School remained so depressed during his early days in Oberlin that he was hardly able to perform the simplest academic tasks. "Robert" rarely raised his heavy eyes from his desk, never answered questions, and seemed incapable of learning his lessons. This behavior frightened Stone at first, but she made a point of speaking compassionately to him every day. Gradually, Robert began to shed the pall that he had acquired in slavery. Soon the two could be seen walking together to Liberty School classes, and as they walked, Robert did much of the talking. He told his teacher and friend about his painful experiences in slavery, as well as his dreams for the future.<sup>35</sup>

Stone called Robert "one of the warmest and truest friends I had," and credited him with giving her an education as valuable as the one she offered him at the Liberty School.<sup>36</sup> In her hometown of West Brookfield, Massachusetts, Stone's abolitionism had been informed by an abstract notion of what slavery was and the experiences of the men and women so enslaved. In Oberlin, however, surrounded by former slaves, Lucy Stone gained a firsthand appreciation for the plight of Southern African Americans that few abolitionists ever acquired. "When I saw how they were *dehumanized*," Stone wrote a family member, "I wondered, that in the wide universe

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<sup>34</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 195; See also Charles A. Garlick, *Life, Including his Escape and Struggle for Liberty, of Charles A. Garlick, Born a Slave in Old Virginia, Who Secured his Freedom by Running Away from his Master's Farm in 1843* (Jefferson, 1902), 9; Jeriah Bonham, *Fifty Years' Recollections*, (Peoria, 1883), 228.

<sup>35</sup> Andrea Moore Kerr, *Lucy Stone: Speaking Out For Equality* (New Brunswick, 1992), 33.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Kerr, *Lucy Stone*, 33.

of god, one tongue could be found, that failed to utter its indignant rebuke against all that pertains to so execrable a system.”<sup>37</sup>

### **“AN UNWELCOME SCHOOL OF ABOLITIONISM”**

Outside the town limits of Oberlin, however, most refused to raise their voice against slavery. Even Oberlin’s crusade to educate free African Americans was viewed by many Ohioans as a bothersome cause that hindered their state’s growth as a national power. The influence wielded by colonizationists and proslavery men during Ohio’s first four decades of statehood led a majority of residents to oppose African American influx on all terms. The promise of an Oberlin education for Black students, especially considering how many were already enrolled at Oberlin, seemed to many Ohioans an unwanted beacon to members of a “despised” and “degraded” race.<sup>38</sup>

To critics, Ohio was to be a white man’s country, populated by the best and brightest white sons and daughters of the older states. They believed that African American immigration should not be encouraged, to say the least, and those free Blacks who did find their way into Ohio’s borders should be pushed back out as quickly as possible. Slavery itself was sometimes opposed, but usually only upon racist grounds and only insofar as it applied to their own state and as a way of not disturbing it. “Good” Ohioans were those who kept the best interests of their home

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Kerr, *Lucy Stone*, 33.

<sup>38</sup> As the local Colonization Society auxiliaries decreased, its members were forced to confront the likelihood of permanently having to contend with the presence of African Americans. Thus many colonizationists shifted their energies to a vigorous support of Ohio’s Black Laws in order to head off any further African American immigration into the state. See Linda L. Geary, *Balanced in the Wind: A Biography of Betsey Mix Cowles* (Lewisburg, PA, 1989), 29; Eugene H. Roseboom and Francis P. Weisenburger, *A History of Ohio* (New York, 1934), 151; Donald John Ratcliffe, *The Politics of Long Division: The Birth of the Second Party System in Ohio, 1818-1828* (Columbus, 2000), 143-146.

state in mind and did not just tolerate the institution in slave states, but actively encouraged it.<sup>39</sup>

One of Ohio's earliest historians, Caleb Atwater, echoed the now-classic refrain of the schizophrenic colonizationists in 1838 when he instructed his fellow Ohioans that "it is our interest, in Ohio, to have slavery continued in the slaveholding states, for a century yet, otherwise our growth would be checked." The wide and deep streams of "wealth, numbers, enterprise, youth, vigor, and the very life blood of the slave-holding states," then pouring into Ohio would be dammed up, "and even roll back to their sources, rendering those states, not merely our equals, but even our superiors, in numbers, wealth, and political power." The immediate presence of slavery in their state remained repugnant to Ohioans who realized the ultimate value of a free labor economy. Their duty as "patriotic citizen[s] of this most prosperous of states ever founded, on the surface of this earth," according to Atwater, was to encourage the institution's incubus-like survival outside its borders. "No," he exclaimed, "never will we whisper a word, that any old Virginia nabob shall hear, advising him to abolish slavery in that most splendid of all countries in the world." The secret of Ohio's growth depended upon the slave states ignoring good business sense and leaving Ohio to developing manufacturing systems and gather a critical mass of the nation's best minds and most able citizens.<sup>40</sup> Ohio's dependence on

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<sup>39</sup> See history and debate over the repeal of the Black Laws in 1846, "Appendix to the Senate Journal," *Journal of the Senate of the State of Ohio; Being the First Session of the Forty Sixth General Assembly, Held in the City of Columbus, Commencing on Monday, December 6, 1847*, Vol. XLVI (Columbus, 1848), 185-198; See also George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York, 1971), 130-164.

<sup>40</sup> Caleb Atwater, *History of the State of Ohio, Natural and Civil* (Cincinnati, 1838), 331; See also "Constitution of the Massilon [Ohio] Colonization Society," in *The African Repository and Colonial Journal*, Vol. XIV, No. 8 (August, 1838), 228-229; Timothy Flint, *The History and Geography of the Mississippi Valley, to Which is Appended a Condensed Physical Geography of the Atlantic United States, and the Whole American Continent*, Vol. 1 (Cincinnati, 1833), 134-139. Indeed, it did appear that slavery had retarded the slave states bordering Ohio. Kentucky was larger than Ohio geographically and founded earlier, and in 1800, had 180,612 free people compared to Ohio's 45,000. However, by 1840, Kentucky could claim a free population of just 597,000 to Ohio's 1,519,000. The *Louisville Journal* assessed "The most potent cause of the more rapid advancement of Cincinnati than

slavery was even deeper than Atwater admitted; Ohio farmers fed Kentucky's slaves and depended on the Southern market for their livelihood.<sup>41</sup>

It should come as no surprise, then, as Oberlin rose to prominence as one of the major abolitionist centers of the nation, Ohio lawmakers recognized the threat that the town and its college supposedly posed to the state's prosperity, and quickly moved to nip the emerging menace in the bud. As James Fairchild remarked, Oberlin had become "the propagandist of...new ideas; and thus was the world's quiet disturbed."<sup>42</sup> Over the next several years, Oberlin's opponents in the Ohio legislature undertook a fierce and unprecedented campaign to destroy the growing college and deny official recognition to the town that nurtured such "offensive" abolitionist ideologies. The Oberlin community had taken an enthusiastic stand against Ohio's twin ideological pillars of racism and support for Southern slavery. Enemies sought to punish them, and in so doing, make a dramatic example of their case.

The original charter granted by the Ohio legislature to the Oberlin Collegiate Institute on February 2, 1834 was apparently given without opposition from state lawmakers.<sup>43</sup> Though the founders' ambitious missionary dreams may have struck

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Louisville is the absence of slavery." Kentuckian Cassius Clay told his state's legislature that "The world is teeming with improved machinery, the combined development of science and art. *To us it is all lost; we are comparatively living in centuries that are gone, we cannot make it, we cannot use it when made.* Ohio is many years younger, and possessed of fewer advantages than our state...OHIO IS A FREE STATE, KENTUCKY A SLAVE STATE." Charles Elliott, *Sinfulness of American Slavery: Proved From its Evil Sources; its Wrongs; its Contrariety to Many Scriptural Commands, Prohibitions, and Principles, and to the Christian Spirit; and from its Evil Effects; Together with Observations on Emancipation, and the Duties of American Citizens with Regard to Slavery*, Vol.II (Cincinnati, 1851), 148-149.

<sup>41</sup> See *The National Register*, Vol.II, No.5 (September 28, 1816), 77; *Littell's Living Age*, Vol. XII, No.7, (March, 1847), 433-436; R. David Edmunds, "A German Chocolate Cake with White Coconut Icing: Ohio and the Native American World," in *Ohio and The World, 1753-2053: Essays Toward a New History of Ohio*, ed. Geoffrey Parker, Richard Sisson, and William Russell Coil (Columbus, 2005), 51; Keith P. Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington, 2004), 34.

<sup>42</sup> James H. Fairchild, *Educational Arrangements and College Life at Oberlin: Inaugural Address of President J.H. Fairchild, Delivered at the Commencement of Oberlin College, August 22, 1866* (New York, 1866), 7.

<sup>43</sup> *Ohio State Journal and Columbus Gazette*, January 27, March 4, 1834.; *A History of Education in the State of Ohio: A Centennial Volume* (Columbus, 1876), 220; *Charters and Basic Laws of Selected*

many as foolish visions that offered slim prospects for success, there was nothing so offensive about the school to merit legislative resistance. It would not be popularly associated with antislavery until 1835, and its explicit championing of coeducational principles was as yet a moot point, since no women would seek admission into the collegiate course until 1837. The official Act of Incorporation made no mention of coeducation whatsoever.<sup>44</sup> After all, the Oberlin Institute's primary and initial goal was to labor unceasingly for the benefit of Western souls, a worthy enterprise for an officially chartered school.

With the clear turn to abolitionism after the arrival of the Lane Rebels and the subsequent national celebrity that the school and town attained, reformers from Oberlin only stayed below the radar of what would prove to be a tremendously hostile state legislature for a short period. In December of 1835, residents of Oberlin commenced their determined campaign to effectively be a thorn in the side of the Ohio legislature by sending in their first petition for the repeal of the state's infamous Black Laws.<sup>45</sup> From that point forward, their relationship with the state government would be an extraordinarily turbulent one.

As the Oberlin Institute grew in late 1836 and early 1837, it sought authorization from the Ohio legislature to expand their board of trustees.<sup>46</sup> However, this was also in the midst of the period when abolitionist missionaries from Oberlin were barnstorming across Ohio in the most intense blitz of antislavery agitation in the United States to date. Moreover, by 1837 leaders of the Oberlin community had made themselves odious to conservative politicians by their willingness to exert their

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*American Universities and Colleges*, ed. Edward Charles Elliott and Merritt Madison Chambers (New York, 1934), 396.

<sup>44</sup> "An Act to Incorporate the Oberlin Collegiate Institute," in Edward Alanson Miller, *The History of Educational Legislation in Ohio From 1803-1850* (Chicago, 1920), 153.

<sup>45</sup> *Ohio State Journal and Columbus Gazette*, December 18, 1835.

<sup>46</sup> *Journal of the Senate of the State of Ohio... 1837*, January 9, 1837.



influence to sway local elections.<sup>47</sup> When Whig Senator John Allen presented the request of his Oberlin constituents to expand their college's board, his bill ran into spirited resistance on the part of several influential Democrats, including Columbus newspaperman Samuel Medary, described as "the Ajax of the Democratic Party in Ohio."<sup>48</sup>

Opponents rationalized their opposition to an ostensible procedural formality on the grounds that the Oberlin Institute was "under clerical control to a highly objectionable extent." More significant, however, was that the school was commonly known as "a hot bed of abolitionism in that part of the State," and a place where people of all races interacted as equals.<sup>49</sup> Opponents brashly declared that the only recognition they would be willing to give such a dubious institution would be through an outright repeal of their original charter. Senator Allen, in his futile defense of the Oberlin bill, urged tongue in cheek that the increase in trustees might actually make it more difficult for the school to hide "their evil practices from the public."<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, the proposal was indefinitely postponed.<sup>51</sup>

The next month, the Oberlin Institute sought documents of incorporation for their Sheffield Manual Labor school, another branch of the Oberlin Institute that had been opened nearby in Lorain County to accommodate the huge numbers of students

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<sup>47</sup> Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 109-110; Fairchild, *Educational Arrangements*, 7.

<sup>48</sup> Jacob H. Studor, *Columbus Ohio: Its History, Resources and Progress, with Numerous Illustrations* (Columbus, 1873), 30, 116-118, 246-256; Alfred E. Lee, *History of the City of Columbus, Capital of Ohio*, Vol.I (New York, 1892), 426. John W. Allen studied law under Judge Samuel Cowles, the father of Henry and John Cowles. He would later go on to become Mayor and Postmaster of Cleveland, and to represent Ohio in Congress from September of 1837 to March of 1841. For more on Allen, see James Harrison Kennedy, *A History of the City of Cleveland: Its Settlement, Rise and Progress*, 17969-1896 (Cleveland, 1896), 216-217; *The Political Registry and Congressional Directory: A Statistical Record of the Federal Officials, Legislative, Executive, and Judicial, of the United States of America, 1776-1878*, ed. B. Perley Poore (Boston, 1878), 256; Charles Lanman, *Biographical Annals of the Civil Government of the United States, During its First Century* (Washington, DC, 1876), 7; Maurice Joblin, *Cleveland Past and Present: Its Representative Men* (Cleveland, 1869), 184.

<sup>49</sup> *Ohio State Journal*, January 20, 1837.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Journal of the Senate of the State of Ohio...1837*, January 17, 1837.

who had swelled the main campus beyond its capacities.<sup>52</sup> Included in this group were African Americans James Bradley and Charles and Gideon Langston.<sup>53</sup> Again, the same Ohio Democrats who had led the attack on the trustees bill took the forefront in opposition to this move on the Oberlin Institute's part, complaining that the Sheffield campus would become no more than an obnoxious extension of Oberlin, and therefore, become yet another unwelcome "school of abolitionism."<sup>54</sup> Only after the addition of amendments that limited the school's income and barred non-white students from enrolling could the bill overcome the Democratic opposition.<sup>55</sup>

At the same time, a House bill to incorporate the town of Oberlin had arrived on the Senate floor for debate, and as Oberlinites might have expected, was indefinitely postponed by another lopsided vote, 24-3.<sup>56</sup> Senator John Allen wrote to

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<sup>52</sup> *Black Abolitionist Papers: The United States, 1830-1846*, ed. C. Peter Ripley (Chapel Hill, 1991), 141n6; "An Act to Incorporate the Sheffield Manual Labor Institute," in *Acts of a General Nature, Passed at the First Session of the Thirty Fifth General Assembly of the State of Ohio; Begun and Held in the City of Columbus, December 5, 1836, and in the Thirty Fifth Year of the Said State*, Vol. XXV (Columbus, 1837), 139-140. Though enrollment numbers are unavailable for 1837 (the school could not afford to print a catalog), by 1838 there were 391 students enrolled at Oberlin, up from 44 at its opening less than five years before. See *General Catalogue of Oberlin College, 1833-1908* (Oberlin, 1909), Int. 117.

<sup>53</sup> See Eliza Gillett to Charlotte Fenner, November 6, 1837, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 5, OCA; "Catalogue of the Sheffield Manual Labor Institution," June, 1836, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 8, OCA. *Black Abolitionist Papers: The United States, 1830-1846*, ed. C. Peter Ripley (Chapel Hill, 1991), 141n6; "An Act to Incorporate the Sheffield Manual Labor Institute," in *Acts of a General Nature, Passed at the First Session of the Thirty Fifth General Assembly of the State of Ohio; Begun and Held in the City of Columbus, December 5, 1836, and in the Thirty Fifth Year of the Said State*, Vol. XXV (Columbus, 1837), 139-140.

<sup>54</sup> *Ohio State Journal*, February 28, 1837; *Journal of the Senate of the State of Ohio... 1837*, 276.

<sup>55</sup> *Journal of the Senate of the State of Ohio... 1837*, 276; *Ohio State Journal*, March 3, 1837; *Acts of a General Nature*, Vol. XXV, 139-140; See also Miller, *The History of Educational Legislation in Ohio*, 135, 205. Either the Senate and House journals are incorrect, or the bill was mistakenly entered into the Ohio Code of Laws, because the second amendment regarding admissions does not appear in the final version of the bill. A quick glance at analogous legislation then before the Ohio legislature suggests that the opposition to Sheffield's incorporation was particularly brutal because of its connection to Oberlin. Democrats introduced a similar resolution regarding admissions to the incorporation of Ohio Wesleyan Institute the same day that Sheffield applied, but where the Oberlin satellite school saw its incorporation amended to bar African Americans by a Senate vote of twenty seven to five, Ohio Wesleyan *avoided* a similar attachment by a vote of twenty three to six. See "An Act to Incorporate the Trustees of the Wesleyan Collegiate Institute," in *Acts of a General Nature*, Vol. XXV, 378-379.

<sup>56</sup> Ellsworth, *Oberlin*, 58-59. The town of Oberlin did not receive a charter from the state government until 1846, and even at that late date the bill received considerable debate as versions of it were volleyed back and forth between the two houses. See *Journal of the Senate of the State of Ohio; Being*

Levi Burnell, Secretary of the Oberlin Institute, that a large majority of the Senate were very hostile to the “abolition doctrines of the North and East and to every thing in reference to them.” This was clearly another instance where anti-abolitionists conflated the characteristics of many Eastern reformers, which they found repellant, with abolitionists as a whole. Try as they might, abolitionists from Oberlin could not always escape comparisons with their more outspoken and radical counterparts. Allen, however, recognized the distinction, and he described their opponents in the Senate as being “as ultra on one side as I think a section of the abolitionists are on the other.”<sup>57</sup> Allen also lamented what impressed him as the utter impossibility of passing any bill through the legislature that would alter in any way the state’s “unholy” Black Laws or any proposal that appeared to favor abolitionists.<sup>58</sup> Oberlin’s incorporation bill met with especially harsh criticism because, as Allen complained to Burrell, “the name was Oberlin, and...you are considered especially friendly to the blacks.”<sup>59</sup>

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*the First Session of the Forty Fourth General Assembly, Held in the City of Columbus, Commencing on Monday, December 1, 1845, Vol.LIX (Columbus, 1846), 189, 307, 465, 486, 491, 516, 540, 565-566, 594, 624, 654.*

<sup>57</sup> John Allen to Levi Burrell, March 27, 1837, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 4, OCA.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.* That same legislative session, at least twenty one other towns received the same charter Oberlin sought, and most of them sailed through the process with no opposition. See, for example, bills for the incorporation of the towns of Cuyahoga Falls, St. Mary’s, Tiffin, and Franklin, respectively, in *Acts of a General Nature, Passed at the First Session of the Thirty Fifth General Assembly of the State of Ohio, Begun and Held in the City of Columbus, December 5, 1836, and in the Thirty Fifth Year of the Said State*, Vol.XXXV (Columbus, 1837), 82-83, 85-86, 126-128, 156-161; The reputation of the town and school also doubtlessly “suffered” that legislative term as a result of the publication of a pamphlet entitled “Oberlin Unmasked,” written by a former student who had been castigated and summarily expelled for his admitted religious infidelity and atheism. Delazon Smith bitterly portrayed Oberlin as a refuge of morally depraved, zealous fanatics, and practical amalgamationists, and included, as one Oberlin man told his wife, “a thousand unfavorable rumors in relation to amalgamation, fanaticism, harboring fugitive slaves, etc., all founded upon rumor without any evidence of their truth.” Those already predisposed to find Oberlin objectionable tended to believe Smith’s brief diatribe. One legislator remarked that “Of Mr. Smith I know nothing; but I have no doubt of the correctness of his statements.” See Oberlin Church Records, March 3, 1837, RG 30/24, FP, Box 12, Folder 12, OCA; Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 370. Fairchild described “Oberlin Unmasked” as “a scurrilous pamphlet published by a dismissed student.” See also Henry Day to Levi Burnell, July 14, 1837, RG 30/24, FP, Box 13, Folder 23, OCA; Oscar T. Shuck, *Representative and Leading Men of the Pacific* (San Francisco, 1870), 679; Josiah Harris to Wife, Thanksgiving A.M., 1842, in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, “Appendix,” 368-70. Perhaps the most objectionable section of Smith’s work in Oberlinites’ eyes was a chapter devoted

By the late 1830s, “Oberlin” had become the most powerful political symbol exploited by the enemies of abolitionism in Ohio. The community’s reputation was due partially to exaggeration and fiction, but there was a greater amount of truth in the accusations of its critics. The Western Reserve college and town offered an unambiguous example of all that was supposedly wrong with abolitionism—they threatened the racial social and economic order of Ohio and all the free states. Most ominously to conservatives, Oberlin Institute and the town’s abolitionist missionary advance guard revealed their threat continuously and tenaciously, despite ongoing attempts to crush their spirit. This, of course, only raised their star higher in the eyes of abolitionists across the North. One antislavery editor from New Hampshire even invoked the romantic poet William Wordsworth and described Oberlin as “a champion cased in adamant” for the abolitionist cause.<sup>60</sup>

### ***PERFECTIONIST POLITICS***

As Oberlin increasingly took the brunt of political anti-abolitionist abuse in the West, they also learned a trick or two from their tormenters. Despite the increasing legislative attacks, Ohio lawmakers’ worst fears regarding Oberlin’s potency seemed to be justified as the town and school joined the vanguard of abolitionists who were increasingly turning to the political realm as another potential remedy to the contagion of American slavery. Hostile Ohio lawmakers could only watch in frustration as the

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entirely to supposedly secret confessions of residents’ sins, which included attempted murder, incest, bestiality, spousal abuse, onanism, and adultery. See Smith, *Oberlin Unmasked*, 43-56. Interestingly, Smith was one of Oberlin’s earliest student abolitionists, and attended at least one anniversary meeting of the Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society as a delegate from Oberlin. See Robert Price, “The Ohio Anti-Slavery Convention of 1836,” *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, Vol.45 (1936), 179.

<sup>60</sup> New Market *Christian Witness*, n.d., in *Friend of Man*, March 18, 1840. Wordsworth’s 1821 sonnet “Persecution of the Scottish Covenanters” describes the immortal and invincible power of a truly righteous cause, using “adamant” in its ancient meaning, referring to a substance that was extremely hard, such as diamond or steel.

tiny Ohio community once again began to influence a shift in the national antislavery movement far beyond what their absolute numbers would suggest.

The transformation among abolitionists from moral suasion and limited organized political involvement to a systematic antislavery voting strategy came about just as the Great Revival of the Second Great Awakening was losing its momentum. As religious leaders sought new strategies and tactics to consolidate the gains made in the revival decades, many abolitionists were also considering new approaches and lines of attack in their fight against slavery. To a significant degree, these developments overlapped, resulting in, as historian Douglas Strong terms it, a sort of “perfectionist politics.”<sup>61</sup> The process of Oberlin’s espousal of political antislavery as an aspect of their abolitionism is an instructive example.

All observers agreed that revivals had been steadily dropping off since 1835.<sup>62</sup> The early successes of Finney and a host of other revivalists had resulted in their emulation by even larger numbers of enthusiastic and persuasive exhorters, yet the end result was often one itinerant following upon the heels of another, regularly presenting audiences with conflicting messages. This was, as historian Nathan Hatch shows, a thorough process of democratization in American spiritual life, but that also meant that it was a period of rapid religious fragmentation.<sup>63</sup> Joseph Smith, himself a beneficiary of the religious ferment of the first third of the nineteenth century, was not the only person to suggest that the competition among countless sects led him to distrust each one equally.<sup>64</sup> In such an environment, hopeful revivalists had to set themselves apart

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<sup>61</sup> See Douglas M. Strong, *Perfectionist Politics: Abolitionism and the Religious Tensions of American Democracy* (Syracuse, 1999).

<sup>62</sup> James D. Bratt, “The Reorientation of American Protestantism, 1835-1845,” *Church History*, Vol.67, No.1 (March, 1998), 64.

<sup>63</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, 1989), 64-66, 80-81, 206-209.

<sup>64</sup> See “Extracts From the History of Joseph Smith,” in *The Pearl of Great Price, Being a Choice Selection from the Revelations, Translations and Narrations of Joseph Smith, First Prophet, Seer, and Revelator to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City, 1891), 56-61; *The Lively*

from others to retain authority, and quite often this was done through appeals to greater and greater emotionalism and sensationalism.

Finney was especially concerned about issues of revival quality and especially of backsliding converts.<sup>65</sup> He would remember in 1845 that the revival fire that swept behind his efforts in 1830 and 1831 was “more superficial” than was truly necessary for thorough conversion, and that it had often degenerated into a spirit of “fanaticism and misrule.”<sup>66</sup> To Finney and others, genuine enthusiasm inspired by the Holy Spirit was not “a spasm, or explosion of the nervous sensibility,” but rather “a calm, deep, sacred flow of the soul in view of the clear, infinitely important, and impressive truths of God.”<sup>67</sup> Conversion based entirely on emotion and outward performance had no substance. Superficial revivals were producing superficial converts whose safety from eternal damnation seemed inevitably ephemeral.

The solution to the problem as several Oberlin professors saw it around 1840 was to translate emotional conversions into settled conviction. Most significantly, this plan included the teachings and writings of Finney, Mahan, and others, on entire sanctification (also called Oberlin Perfectionism). Individuals genuinely concerned about the fate of their immortal souls could undertake a lifetime of deliberate living, and by choosing holiness in each of their actions, a Christian could sustain his or her salvation while they avoided the peaks and valleys produced by series’ of superficial revivals. They also expressed a sentiment that religious authorities across the nation were articulating—it was time for consolidation. As historian Charles Hambrick-Stowe points out, Finney “envisioned a grand partnership of settled pastors, lay men

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*Experiment Continued*, ed. Jerald C. Brauer (Macon, GA, 1988), 138-139; Bratt, “The Reorientation of American Protestantism,” 64.

<sup>65</sup> Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, 1996), 181; Bratt, “The Reorientation of American Protestantism,” 65.

<sup>66</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, January 29, 1845.

<sup>67</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 7, 1845.

and women, and evangelists working to develop mature congregations of Christians committed to serving God and doing good in the world.” Not surprisingly, he sought an extension of the environment he oversaw in Oberlin.<sup>68</sup>

Oberlin perfectionism helped its followers to locate the channels God would use to effect His plans in a post-Revival America, plans that most assuredly included the abolition of slavery. The greatest antislavery efforts during the Revival had concentrated on reshaping the national conscience through moral appeals. They had first sought a spiritual revolution through mass Christian conversion, a process that they believed had to be accomplished before any sort of more worldly antislavery movement could be successful. Some among them, Finney included, believed that right-minded political action would be a direct result of a universal awareness of the sinfulness of slavery. It would literally be God’s government on earth, and few abolitionists before the mid 1830s saw much point in debating the merits of political strategies, since the whole question would be rendered moot by the Lord’s approaching millennium.<sup>69</sup>

However, widespread and uncontrollable revivals had proven themselves imperfect tools for saving souls and bringing about God’s reign on earth. Many Oberlinites recognized that the moral government of God was also highly dependent on human choice—that is, the aggregate of worldly opinion, human government. Their meticulous study of the Bible showed conclusively that God regularly exerted moral influence through the instrumentality of worldly governments and actually

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<sup>68</sup> Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney*, 218. Finney saw little value in ideological constancy if the principles had lost their effectiveness. A student once asked him to reconcile a theological statement which he made in an Oberlin lecture with one he had written in one of his books some years earlier. He replied sharply, “Don’t quote Finney to me!” As historian Frances Hosford pointed out in 1937, Finney recognized that truth was never transitory, but man’s understanding of it was always changing. Thus, he fostered true freedom and thought and enquiry, and as Hosford remembered, “Oberlin theology has never been forced to mount guard over its dogmas.” Frances Juliette Hosford, *Father Shipperd’s Magna Charta: A Century of Coeducation in Oberlin College* (Boston, 1937), 166-167.

<sup>69</sup> See Richard H. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1837-1860* (New York, 1992), 8-10.

commanded His people to obey magistrates and rulers. Moreover, Finney declared it nonsense to admit that Christians were under an obligation to obey human governments while having nothing to do with the choice of those who would govern. Rather, every person who possessed the franchise or any degree of moral influence over others was bound to exert that influence in the promotion of virtue and happiness. “As human governments are plainly indispensable to the highest good of man,” Finney argued, “they are bound to exert their influence to secure a legislation that is in accordance with the law of God.”<sup>70</sup> Finney had long assured his congregants that God witnessed even their secret political actions, and would bless or curse them according to the choices they made.<sup>71</sup> Since contemporary governmental bodies had proven themselves some of the most obstinate opponents of the Oberlin community’s antislavery message while at the same time demonstrating the considerable force they could wield towards obstructionary ends, the friends of the slave there realized that a meeting on their opponents’ home territory would be necessary.<sup>72</sup>

Finneyite revivalism taught converts that one’s salvation depended on a genuine and independent decision to perform the acts necessary to become saved. However, that salvation also came with obligations, the most important of which was for the newly-born Christian to do everything within his or her power to save others and to assist in the salvation of the entire world. This led evangelicals operating within the budding political antislavery environment to approve of an activist state, one that was capable of supporting reform movements like antislavery. Slavery was a wicked and unacceptable social institution; Christians had the ability and ceaseless obligation to eradicate all evil. Therefore, antislavery politics seemed to many

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<sup>70</sup> Finney, *Skeletons of a Course of Theological Lectures*, Vol.I (Oberlin, 1840), 235-238. For the Garrisonian criticism of Finney’s statements, see *Liberator*, October 29, 1841.

<sup>71</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 274-275.

<sup>72</sup> See Charles Grandison Finney, *Skeletons*, 235-248.



abolitionists a legitimate venture.<sup>73</sup> In Oberlin, the heightened religious atmosphere kept its citizens motivated to act in ways consistent with the obligations undertaken from the moment they were saved.

Finney was explicit in his instructions regarding what he believed to be the political duties of Christian abolitionists. “Christians,” he preached, “can no more take neutral ground on this subject, than they can take neutral ground on the subject of the sanctification of the Sabbath.” He likened antislavery ambivalence to an enemy of God who disclaimed that he was neither a saint nor sinner. His deception would be in his declaration to take neutral ground “and pray, ‘good Lord and good devil,’ because he did not know which side would be more popular.”<sup>74</sup>

Except for the nonresistants of the Garrisonian camp, it was hard for most abolitionists to disagree with Finney’s reasoning. Since they had gained nothing from the South besides abuse, nothing from the North besides mob violence and laws which proscribed the lives of Northern African Americans, and little from Congress besides “gag rules” and official censure, many abolitionists increasingly came to the conclusion that moral suasion, questioning of candidates, and petitioning were not nearly enough by themselves. Alvan Stewart, a man courted by the Oberlin Institute in the mid 1830s for his political acumen to join their faculty as professor of law and political economy, complained that “We might as well send the lamb as an ambassador to a community of wolves. I would not lift my hand to sign a petition to Congress, to be insulted by that body.”<sup>75</sup> Many abolitionists were coming to recognize that since slavery was established and sustained by law, it had to be overthrown through the ballot box and the election of antislavery lawmakers.

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<sup>73</sup> Hammond, “Revival Religion and Anti-Slavery Politics,” 379-380, 387; Strong, *Perfectionist Politics*, 4-5, 27-28.

<sup>74</sup> Charles Grandison Finney *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (New York, 1835), 275.

<sup>75</sup> Alvan Stewart, quoted in Gilbert Hobbs Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York, 1957), 149.

Abolitionists realized with regret just how deeply ingrained the nation's anti-abolitionist tendencies were. Though the resulting frustration did not lead them to declare that moral suasion was no longer tenable, it was clear to many that it could not stand alone as the only means of overthrowing slavery. Even Garrison admitted that abolitionists had underestimated the deplorable state of the nation and never imagined that in order to protect slavery, the free states would voluntarily "trample under foot all order, law and government, or brand the advocates of universal liberty as incendiaries."<sup>76</sup> Still, abolitionists' moral concentrations would not to be jettisoned, but rather expanded after intense introspective examinations of their duties as perfectionists led them to think of progressive politics as a moral obligation in itself.<sup>77</sup>

Oberlin abolitionists heeded Finney's charge to "meddle with politics...for the same reason that they [were] bound to seek the universal good of all men."<sup>78</sup> Perfectionists across the North followed similar advice. As Theodore Clarke Smith notes of abolitionists' entrance into antislavery politics, "expediency saw in such action[s] a way to impress obdurate politicians; impatience expected in this course a shorter road to abolition than through mere moral protest." In addition to the religious implications of perfectionist politics, many abolitionists were already struck by the veritable effectiveness of the small handful of state and national politicians, many of the most successful hailing from Ohio. They appreciated the gains to be made by approaching the ballot box and concentrating their votes behind like-minded men for local and national office.<sup>79</sup>

By the early 1840s, there were already a few men who, though they primarily considered themselves statesmen, also demonstrated through their words and actions

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<sup>76</sup> *Liberator*, December 8, 1837.

<sup>77</sup> See L.L. Rice, "Talk re: Slavery," April, 1841, FP, RG 30/24, Box 3, Folder 10, OCA.

<sup>78</sup> Finney, *Skeletons of a Course of Theological Lectures*, 241.

<sup>79</sup> Theodore Clarke, *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Northwest* (New York, 1897), 23.

before lawmaking bodies that they were true-hearted abolitionists. Oberlin had close connections to many of these stalwart antislavery politicians from Ohio. In the early days of political antislavery, these elected officials regularly consulted with their friends in Oberlin with regards to antislavery political strategy.

Benjamin Franklin Wade of Ashtabula County was an active lawyer and abolitionist who was elected as a Whig to the Ohio Senate in 1835. There, he was one of the most outspoken antislavery voices in legislature, and was the Oberlin Institute's champion in the state Senate in the early 1840s as lawmakers sought the revocation of the school's charter. "Frank" Wade would go on to achieve national political prominence in the 1850s and 1860s, as would his brother, Edward, who was professor of law at Oberlin from 1838-1842.<sup>80</sup> The younger Wade credited his Oberlin students with initially teaching him more about slavery and the law than he actually taught them.<sup>81</sup>

Democrat Thomas Morris, the man who earned the distinction as America's "first abolition senator," was sent to Washington with the help of the Oberlin community's influence, and was truly the hero of political antislavery to many Oberlinites during his service from 1833 to 1839.<sup>82</sup> He was first associated with prominent abolitionists from Oberlin during a series of antislavery lectures in the mid 1830s, and later served alongside many of them on the Executive Committee of the

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<sup>80</sup> *Journal of the Senate of the State of Ohio; Being the First Session of the Fortieth General Assembly, Held in the City of Columbus, and Commencing Monday, December 6, 1841* (Columbus, 1841), 358-359, 405, 407, 418, 435, 460, 505, 565; L.P. Brockett, *Men of Our Day; or, Biographical Sketches of Patriots, Orators, Statesmen, Generals, Reformers, Financiers and Merchants, Now on the Stage of Action* (Philadelphia, 1868), 239-240; Harriet Taylor Upton, *History of the Western Reserve*, Vol.I (Chicago, 1910), 574; Rowland W. Rerick, *State Centennial History of Ohio: Covering the Periods of Indian, French and British Dominion, the Territory Northwest, and the Hundred Years of Statehood* (Madison, 1902), 243.

<sup>81</sup> Paul D. Carrington, *Stewards of Democracy: Law as a Public Profession* (New York, 1999), 27.

<sup>82</sup> Morris, *Life of Thomas Morris* (Cincinnati, 1856), 105-106; Roseboom and Weisenberger, *History of the State of Ohio*, 378; *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 22, 1839; "Report of the Board of Managers of the Lorain County Anti-Slavery Society," *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 31, 1839.

Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>83</sup> Among the first to articulate the threat to the North of the “Slave Power,” Morris famously clashed with both John C. Calhoun and Henry Clay on the Senate floor.<sup>84</sup> His counterpart in the House was Whig Joshua R. Giddings, Frank Wade’s one-time legal partner. Giddings was elected in 1838 to represent the Western Reserve’s sixteenth district, was already a passionate reformer before he arrived in Washington. There, he joined former President John Quincy Adams in the House as the most outspoken opponents of the “gag rule.” Giddings was eventually notoriously censured by that body for his relentless attempts to bring the issue before their attention. This included petitions from many of his Oberlin friends who did not even live in his district.<sup>85</sup>

Yet as the 1830s came to a close, the mainstream political parties were closing ranks to crush any abolitionist influence from within. B. F. Wade nearly lost his renomination bid to the Ohio Senate in 1838, and was ultimately defeated in the general election as conservative Whigs and Democrats united against him.<sup>86</sup> In 1839, the Ohio Whig Convention accused Thomas Morris of misrepresenting the true interests of the state.<sup>87</sup> Not to be outdone, the Democratically-controlled Ohio Legislature, in whose hands lay the power to renominate Morris, publicly questioned

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<sup>83</sup> William Birney, *James G. Birney and his Times: The Genesis of the Republican Party with Some Account of Abolitionist Movements in the South Before 1828* (New York, 1890), 258.

<sup>84</sup> “Speech of Hon. Thomas Morris, of Ohio: In Reply to the Speech of the Hon. Henry Clay in Senate, Feb. 9, 1839” (New York, 1839), 5; Morris, *The Life of Thomas Morris*, 95-107; Smith, *Liberty and Free Soil Parties*, 24; Edward C. Reilly, *The Early Slavery Controversy in the Western Reserve*, PhD dissertation, Western Reserve University (1940), 280-284; *Cleveland Observer*, March 15, 1838; *Philanthropist*, January 1, May 14, 1839; *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 22, 1839; *Philanthropist*, March 23, 1839.

<sup>85</sup> See *Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States, Being the First Session of the Twenty Sixth Congress, Begun and Held at the City of Washington, December 2, 1839, in the Sixty Fourth Year of the Independence of the Said States* (Washington, D.C., 1840), 1513-1514; See also James Brewer Stewart, *Joshua R. Giddings and the Tactics of Radical Politics* (Cleveland, 1970).

<sup>86</sup> See Vernon L. Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom: The Liberty Party in the Old Northwest, 1838-1848* (Kent, 1990), 31-32.

<sup>87</sup> *Philanthropist*, July 24, 1838.

him regarding his views on slavery. His liberal replies so inflamed that body that they refused to extend his service another term.<sup>88</sup>

Morris' recall from Washington reflected to many in Ohio the complete and utter bankruptcy of the two major parties.<sup>89</sup> Many Northern Democrats had endorsed bigotry and mob violence and were anathema to abolitionists. Whig leaders appeared only slightly more acceptable, often mixing condemnations of "mob rule" with criticisms of abolitionists as "amalgamationists." At the same time they praised the composed statesmanship of men like Daniel Webster and Henry Clay, the most vocal supporters of colonization in Congress. Frustrated Ohio abolitionists realized that most Northern Whigs were simply distinguishing themselves from the positions on race and slavery of the Northern Democrats while simultaneously keeping in step with their national party's stances on intersectional harmony and white supremacy.<sup>90</sup>

Committed antislavery men were becoming, as James Brewer Stewart describes, "self-consciously estranged" from the majority of the white North.<sup>91</sup> So while a few politician-abolitionists continued their frustrating crusade to inject antislavery into politics, abolitionists from Oberlin and like-minded reformers sought some means to gather this knowingly alienated constituency into a positive force for antislavery. The Oberlin community joined the spreading notion that political action held a powerful religious significance as a manifestation of divine will; perfection justified many abolitionists' entrance into an arena many once considered profane and morally treacherous.

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<sup>88</sup> Morris, *Life of Thomas Morris*, 174-205; Roseboom and Weisenberger, *History of the State of Ohio*, 378.

<sup>89</sup> *Philanthropist*, March 23, 1839; *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 22, 1839; Reilley, *The Early Slavery Controversy*, 282; *Philanthropist*, January 1, 1839.

<sup>90</sup> See James Brewer Stewart, "Modernizing 'Difference': The Political Meanings of Color in the Free States, 1776-1840," in *Race and the Early Republic: Racial Consciousness and Nation-Building in the Early Republic*, ed. Michael A. Morris and James Brewer Stewart (Lanham, MD, 2002), 123.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.* 124-125.

Even as early as 1837, abolitionists from Oberlin were including a recognizable political appeal in their antislavery agitation, pressing their converts to protect everyone's natural and civil rights and to secure "correct principles" through the political process.<sup>92</sup> Enemies outside of Oberlin already blamed the community for improperly influencing local elections. At one point in 1837, a dozen thugs volunteered to travel to Oberlin to "tar and feather Mr. Finney" for his decisive role in swaying voters.<sup>93</sup> From the late 1830s through the Civil War, there was nothing in the political atmosphere at Oberlin that rivaled slavery and antislavery in importance.<sup>94</sup>

Abolitionists were turning a corner towards political action; however, their main thrust remained a religious one. In Oberlin, the movement was still fundamentally perfectionist, but after the late 1830s, it expressed its religiosity in a more collected and organized fashion. There would not be a perpetual revival to keep the most important reform issues before the eyes of the nation, but instead, a cumulative effort by godly individuals among the body politic to effect God's will and realize critical change. Finney preached to a New York audience in the late 1830s that "if you will give your vote only for honest men, the country will be obliged to have honest rulers," and the parties "will be compelled to put up honest men as candidates."<sup>95</sup>

However, even as Finney spoke those words, the political establishment had already begun to demonstrate to him and other politically minded abolitionists just how set in conservatism the main parties truly were, and just how few honest men dared tread in their territory.<sup>96</sup> There remained the need for a more precise plan of

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<sup>92</sup> Smith, *Oberlin Unmasked*, 67.

<sup>93</sup> Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 109-110; Fairchild, *Educational Arrangements*, 7.

<sup>94</sup> E.L. Barnard to Frances Hosford, n.d. (1929?), RG 30/35, Frances Hosford Papers, OCA.

<sup>95</sup> Finney quoted in William C. Cochrane, *Charles Grandison Finney Memorial Address, Delivered at the Dedication of the Finney Memorial Chapel, Oberlin, June 21, 1908* (Philadelphia, 1908), 57; See also *The Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, Vol.IV, No.10 (July, 1908), 387.

<sup>96</sup> Finney, *Memoirs*, 387-388.

attack by abolitionists in the field of politics. Petitions, though they had served a valuable purpose, would no longer suffice on their own. Often, questioning of politicians and bartering of blocs of votes for candidates' pledges on antislavery issues seemed more promising. In 1839, the Oberlin Anti-Slavery Society pledged its support to the Whig candidate for Lorain County's seat in the state legislature, but only upon his solemn, written promise that he would use his seat to attempt to abolish the state's Black Laws.<sup>97</sup> Democrats were quick to blame the Oberlin community for their candidate's resounding defeat. An Elyria man wrote that "Oberlin with her array of abolitionists was against us. It was thought the whigs [sic.] would not bow to Oberlin, but we were mistaken." It was all too clear to Ohio Democrats that "The requisitions of Oberlin were complied with, to the very letter."<sup>98</sup> Similar tactical abolitionist victories were celebrated in many other northern districts during this time period.<sup>99</sup>

Often, however, once abolitionists' support served the purposes of the Whig Party, the politicians often brushed their desires aside and forgot campaign promises.<sup>100</sup> Though some Northern Whigs did not support their party's duplicity, the increasing control of the party by its Southern wing made it more and more odious to antislavery men.<sup>101</sup> Thus Ohio abolitionist voters in the late 1830s were presented with a crisis that they shared with political antislavery agitators across the North. Few political antislavery men were prepared to completely abandon their more familiar and secure positions within one of the two major political camps in order to strike out independently through a third party. Even the Whig Party, that of John Quincy

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<sup>97</sup> *Ohio Atlas and Elyria Advertiser*, May 28, 1839; *Philanthropist*, June 18, 1839.

<sup>98</sup> *Ohio Statesman*, October 19, 1838.

<sup>99</sup> See Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom*, 16-33; Smith, *Liberty and Free Soil Parties*, 27-34.

<sup>100</sup> Henry G. Wheeler, *History of Congress: Biographical and Political: Comprising Memoirs of Members of the Congress of the United States* (New York, 1848), 443.

<sup>101</sup> Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York, 2003), 156.

Adams, Joshua Giddings, and the Wade brothers, was severely tainted by its proslavery Southern contingent who demanded silence on the slavery issue as the price of national unity.

However, James G. Birney spoke for a growing number of fed up abolitionists in Ohio when he declared that ideological consistency demanded “that discarding every name of party, we vote for men of *principle*—the friends of LIBERTY, of LAW, of ORDER.”<sup>102</sup> By 1838, the annual meeting of the Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society (presided over by Oberlinite William Dawes), and many local Ohio auxiliaries were demanding that politicians demonstrate firm antislavery principles and a desire to do away with all laws and regulations based on race in order to win the support of antislavery voters.<sup>103</sup> Especially on the Western Reserve, abolitionists interrogated candidates for state and local office and sent them questionnaires seeking their opinions on the important antislavery questions of the day. Still, they stopped short of naming an independent nominee when none of the candidates measured up to their standards.<sup>104</sup>

The election of 1838 was a veritable revolution in Ohio antislavery politics. Many antislavery men came to the polls with Democratic ballots, hoping to strengthen Thomas Morris’s chances for reelection. Perhaps even more important, however, was the fallout over Ohio’s Whig Governor Joseph Vance’s course in the Mahan affair. John B. Mahan was an Ohio minister who had been indicted by a Kentucky grand jury for allegedly assisting a slave’s escape to freedom. Vance used his influence to have Mahan arrested and turned over to the Kentucky authorities.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> *Philanthropist*, March 31, 1837.

<sup>103</sup> Roseboom and Weisenberger, *The History of the State of Ohio*, 383.

<sup>104</sup> *Philanthropist*, March 27, 1838.

<sup>105</sup> For more on the John Mahan affair, see *Trial of Rev. John B. Mahan, for Felony, in the Mason Circuit Court of Kentucky, Commencing on Tuesday, the 13<sup>th</sup>, and Terminating on Monday, the 19<sup>th</sup> of November, 1838* (Cincinnati, 1838).



News of the arrest and extradition swept through Ohio, in the words of the *Philanthropist*, “like an electric shock.” Nothing else Vance could have done would have as disastrous an effect on his chances for reelection.<sup>106</sup> Once-wary abolitionists and sympathetic enemies of the Slave Power rushed to the polls to register their outrage over Ohio’s capitulation to slaveholders, and when the dust had settled on Election Day, the results were disastrous for Vance and the Whigs. The Governor, who had been elected by a majority of 6,000 four years earlier, was trounced this time by more than 5,000 votes. Across the board in Ohio, Whig candidates for the legislature were either defeated by Democrats in their bids for reelection or elected by much reduced majorities.<sup>107</sup>

Abolitionists never doubted for a moment that the turnaround was due entirely to their contribution. Whig newspapers conceded that abolitionist boasts were probably correct. More friendly sheets were euphoric. The *Philanthropist* sang the praises of abolitionist voters in Ohio, commending them for being the first demonstrably strong antislavery voting bloc in the North. The *Emancipator* put the change in the election returns for the Ohio legislature at 25,000 owing to abolitionists’ support for Thomas Morris. Reports of their political maneuvers and successes generated an outpouring of encouragement from the Eastern antislavery press.<sup>108</sup> Though the Whig losses left the Democrats in power, the united mass of antislavery voters in Ohio had demonstrated the consequences of betraying their trust. Whigs could no longer take these votes for granted, and thereafter would have to actively earn the valuable support of antislavery men.

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<sup>106</sup> *Philanthropist*, October 23, 1838.

<sup>107</sup> Smith, *Liberty and Free Soil Parties*, 30; Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom*, 47.

<sup>108</sup> *Emancipator*, quoted in *Philanthropist*, December 11, 1838; Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom*, 21, 47; See also *Liberator*, August 31, November 2, 1838; *New York Journal of Commerce*, n.d., in *Liberator*, November 2, 1838; Jacob Ridenour to Henry Clay, October 12, 1838, *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol.9, ed. Robert Seager (Lexington, 1988), 239-240.

***“THE PRINCIPLES OF IMMUTABLE JUSTICE”***

However, the antislavery electoral successes of 1838 only made the frustrations of 1839 more frustrating. That winter, Oberlin and Ohio abolitionists would lose all hope that moral suasion alone would convert the South to emancipation or that reform within the two major political parties in the North was a realistic possibility. Ohio’s relationship to Kentucky, a slaveholding state since its founding in 1792, mirrored that of the free states with those of the slaveholding South. With only the Ohio River separating the two states, Ohio’s commerce was largely dependent on that of its neighbor, and vice versa. Its citizens often clothed and fed themselves with the products of slave labor, were connected to Kentucky slaveholding by close family and political ties, and as already mentioned, many Ohioans believed that their own state’s prosperity depended upon the health of the slave regime in Kentucky.

On January 12, 1839, the Ohio legislature seemingly went out of its way in its attempts to conciliate the complaints of the slaveholding states, particularly Kentucky. The Ohio House of Representatives passed a series of resolutions that denied Congressional jurisdiction over slavery in the various states, condemned abolitionist agitation as an endeavor that had not and could never produce any positive results, and declared abolitionists’ activities fanatical which would only lead to the disruption of the Union. However, commentators at the *Oberlin Evangelist* singled out two additional resolutions as the most insulting and galling. These resolved that the repeal of the state’s Black Laws was both impolitic and inexpedient and would only lead the African American population of all the other states to rush into Ohio’s borders. The last, anticipating the logic of Roger Taney’s *Dred Scott* decision eighteen years later, declared that “the blacks and mulattoes who may be residents within this State have no

*Constitutional right to present their petitions to the General Assembly for any purpose whatsoever.”*<sup>109</sup>

To many Oberlinites, it seemed as if Ohio lawmakers’ subservience to slaveholders not only let them, progressive Ohioans of all races, and Southern bondsmen down, but actively persecuted them whenever possible. The editors of the *Oberlin Evangelist* could only express “*grief and sorrow of heart*” that legislators so blatantly ignored the express desires of a portion of their constituents, the legal privileges and rights of another, and trampled upon “the principles of immutable justice.” They had entered 1839 with high hopes that lawmakers would rectify the injustices contained in the state constitution, but by late January, their optimism had been dashed.<sup>110</sup>

The January resolutions were followed by events and the passage of an act even more infuriating to Ohio abolitionists. That same month, two Kentucky politicians, a Whig, James T. Morehead, and a Democrat, John Speed-Smith, arrived in Columbus as commissioners from their state legislature.<sup>111</sup> They had been sent to Ohio on an errand designed to gather support for an Ohio fugitive slave law to assist Kentucky slaveholders in reclaiming their escaped bondsmen. On February 12 the governor personally sent the commissioners’ request for such a law to the legislature, and it was referred to the Judiciary Committee with favorable instructions. The Kentuckians’ bill then passed the House 54-15 on February 19. In the Senate, despite the Herculean efforts of Benjamin F. Wade to prevent it, the bill passed 26-10 on February 22, and became law.<sup>112</sup> In both houses, the only opposition to the bill came

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<sup>109</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 13, March 27, 1839; *Emancipator*, February 7, 1839.

<sup>110</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 13, 1839.

<sup>111</sup> *Philanthropist*, January 1, 1839.

<sup>112</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 22, August 13, 1839; A.G. Riddle, *The Life of Benjamin F. Wade* (Cleveland, 1888), 138-144.

from northern Ohio, particularly the Western Reserve representatives.<sup>113</sup> A public feast was thrown in honor of the Kentucky commissioners, and after gorging themselves on the free-labor produced bounty of Ohio's farms, they returned home in March to report on their unqualified success.<sup>114</sup>

Though a federal fugitive law remained in effect, Kentucky had demanded "more effective" protection of its slave property.<sup>115</sup> Ohio lawmakers complied and imposed even stiffer penalties on all those who would oppose the state's new law. Any person found guilty of harboring, concealing, interfering in any way with the recapture of alleged fugitive, or frustrating in any way the smooth operation of this 1839 law could be fined as much as five hundred dollars and imprisoned for up to sixty days. Conviction would now qualify as both a state and federal offense.<sup>116</sup>

The new statute subjected Ohioans to legal obligations that other Northerners would not have to confront until 1850. In a town like Oberlin, which had always held a sober respect for governmental authority, many citizens were unsure of their obligations under it.<sup>117</sup> Charles Finney, however, was not. To him, slavery had always stood between the enslaved and his right to independent moral agency. As the Fugitive Act was passing through the Ohio legislature, Oberlin's most powerful shaper

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<sup>113</sup> Ivan Eugene McDougall, "Slavery in Kentucky," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol.III, No.3 (July, 1918), 268-269; Robert E. Chaddock, *Ohio Before 1850: A Study of the Early Influence of Pennsylvania and Southern Populations in Ohio* (New York, 1908), 86.

<sup>114</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 22, 1839; *Philanthropist*, March 26, 1839.

<sup>115</sup> Leo Alilunas, "Fugitive Slave Cases in Ohio Prior to 1850," *Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, Vol.49 (January-March, 1940), 166.

<sup>116</sup> *Philanthropist*, January 29, February 5, 12, March 12, 1839; *Oberlin Evangelist*, March 27, 1839; Roseboom and Weisenberger, *The History of the State of Ohio*, 381-382. The United States Supreme Court ruling in *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* (1842) eventually declared that the enforcement of the fugitive slave provisions of the Constitution lay exclusively with federal courts, thus the Ohio law was declared unconstitutional and Ohio repealed its fugitive slave laws and obstruction penalties. However, this only resulted in a renewed effort to enforce the federal fugitive directives. See Michael Les Benedict and John F. Winkler, *The History of Ohio Law* (Athens, OH, 2004), 277-278; Stephen Middleton, *The Black Laws: Race and the Legal Process in Early Ohio* (Athens, OH, 2006), 92-114.

<sup>117</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 13, March 27, 1839; See also the Oberlin commencement addresses of Horace C. Taylor, "Validity of Civil Government Established by Reason," and James Steele, "Validity of Civil Government Established by Scripture," 1840 Commencement file, RG 0/00/14, College General, Series 15, Box 1, OCA.

of public opinion was busy excoriating it in the pages of the *Oberlin Evangelist*. “To enslave a man,” Finney wrote, “is to treat a man as a thing—to set aside moral agency; and to treat a moral agent as a mere piece of property.” The new law did just that—it reduced men to things, and as such, it was abhorrent to God and Finney’s own moral sensibilities. “To be a slave,” he explained, “is to be under the necessity of choosing between two evils,” that is, choosing either to remain in abject bondage or be brutally punished for any attempted escape. The fugitive law was meant to force free men to aid in entangling more tightly the fleeing slave “in a course of life not chosen for its own sake” and without moral options.<sup>118</sup>

Finney’s argument, when taken a step further, highlights the success of abolitionists from Oberlin and Ohio in their attempts to draw broad political support for the antislavery cause. By demonstrating how slavery had a negative effect on the lives of all Northerners, they were able to gain a degree of encouragement, albeit potentially selfish and not necessarily humanitarian, for their cause.<sup>119</sup> To combat the usurpation of the Slave Power of moral and political authority, Finney, more than a decade before the more widely publicized public statements of William H. Seward or Theodore Parker, invoked a doctrine of “higher law” for Americans to follow.<sup>120</sup> The Eastern antislavery press reprinted excerpts of Finney’s editorial, lauded it as a “stern and settled defiance of wicked law-makers,” and congratulated Finney for “setting a lesson for the whole country, and preparing the way for emancipation” in the South.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 13, 1839; James David Essig, “The Lord’s Free Man: Charles Grandison Finney and his Abolitionism,” *Civil War History*, Vol.24 (March, 1978), 35-36.

<sup>119</sup> Reilley, *The Early Slavery Controversy in the Western Reserve*, 205-211, 277.

<sup>120</sup> For more on Parker’s and Seward’s espousal of higher law doctrine, see Henry Steele Commager, *Theodore Parker: Yankee Crusader* (Boston, 1982), 197-213; Theodore Parker, *The Trial of Theodore Parker for the “Misdemeanor” for the Speech in Faneuil Hall Against Kidnapping, Before the Circuit Court of the United States, at Boston, April 3, 1855, with The Defense* (Boston, 1855); William Henry Seward, “An Appeal to the Higher Law,” in *American History Told by Contemporaries: Welding of the Nation 1845-1900*, Vol.IV, ed. Albert Bushnell Hart (New York, 1918), 56-58; John M. Taylor, *William Henry Seward: Lincoln’s Right Hand* (London, 1996), 76-86.

<sup>121</sup> *Friend of Man*, September 11, 1839. The idea of a “higher law” superseding human legislative enactments was not new. Indeed, its origins were biblical, and the appeal to the “law of nature” was

Within days of the passage of Ohio's Fugitive Act, Finney and the editors of the *Oberlin Evangelist* began explaining their theory of civil disobedience. Finney declared that "whatever is contrary to the law of God is not law, is not obligatory upon men." Man's laws which stood in contradistinction to God's laws were necessarily void, and Christians were bound to *disobey* them if they wished to please the Lord.<sup>122</sup> This was not anarchy, however. Human government was an extension of the known will of God, yet they did not feel bound to human laws as any absolute compact or agreement, but only as God's own institutions for the good of mankind.<sup>123</sup> When the powers allowed to man went beyond the limits that God intended, "coming between man and his maker," Oberlinites aligned within the Almighty's bounds.<sup>124</sup> As possessors of free will, individuals had the power to both combine and upset the harmony between God's law and man's. Since laws did not execute themselves, and since they could never be successfully executed if public sentiment made their enforcement impossible, Oberlin residents saw it as their duty to "have *moral power*" and set the example of noncompliance from which the rest of society could learn.<sup>125</sup>

Ohio lawmakers who had been empowered by antislavery votes in 1838 apparently saw little inconsistency with their answers to abolitionists' interrogations in October and their support for the 1839 fugitive bill. The resulting loss of abolitionist confidence in the efficacy of their political activism to that point was palpable. These developments seemed to be the very worst case scenario imagined by the Ohio abolitionists, who in the report of their state antislavery society in 1839 lamented, "We have trusted that the paternal character of our institutions, the leniency of our laws,

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thousands of years old. American Unitarians and Transcendentalists had also held up the notion of a "higher law" in the 1830s, but Finney was one of the first to publicly invoke the concept in relation to laws concerning "fugitive" slaves.

<sup>122</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, March 13, 1839.

<sup>123</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 13, 1839.

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*

and the purity of our political creed, would so effectually secure the affection and confidence of the people.” Naively, they had “imbibed the idea of whatever of wrong was permitted in our institutions, or was through negligence incorporated with our constitution or laws, would soon yield to the remedies prescribed by patriotism.” They had hoped that in the passage of time they would “advance from point to point, until all our institutions, based on the principle of eternal right, should become the admiration of the nations.”<sup>126</sup> Now, political abolitionists in Ohio were stunned dumbstruck. The editors of the *Oberlin Evangelist* could only take solace in the fact that delinquent legislators would “stand condemned at the bar of their own conscience, and at the bar of God.”<sup>127</sup>

However, the events of that winter emboldened Finney. He was neither shocked into stagnancy by the stalled political movement in Ohio nor willing to let the minions of slavery off without a thorough tongue lashing for their treachery. Finney had already expressed his anger over the boldness of the Fugitive Slave Act (he refused to legitimize it by calling it a “law”), and carried his fury to the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society’s May anniversary.<sup>128</sup> As Professor James Thome predicted, Finney’s opposition to the fugitive bill was the defining aspect of the convention, and his words struck strongly at the legislation.<sup>129</sup>

After being selected as the convention’s chairman by the 300 plus official delegates, Finney moved for the adoption of nine successive resolutions condemning the fugitive bill.<sup>130</sup> Ever the educator-minister, Finney accompanied each resolution

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<sup>126</sup> Clayton Douglas Cormany, *Ohio's Abolitionist Campaign: The Rhetoric of Conversation*, PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, 1981, 93

<sup>127</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, March 27, 1839.

<sup>128</sup> See Finney, *Skeletons*, 203.

<sup>129</sup> James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, May 18, 1839, *The Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Aneglina Grimke Weld, and Sara Grimke, 1822-1844*, Vol.II, ed. Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. DuMond (New York, 1934), 763-766.

<sup>130</sup> James G. Birney to Joshua Leavitt, May 31, 1839, in *Liberator*, June 28, 1839.

with a detailed and clear explanation of its exact meaning and implications. He further elaborated on his “higher law” doctrine in two of the resolutions, declaring that no human law “can annul, or set aside, the law or authority of God,” and so far as man’s fugitive law violated God’s authority, obedience to it would be “highly immoral.”<sup>131</sup>

James G. Birney was in the audience to hear Finney’s oration, and was awed by the professor’s zeal. In a letter to an abolitionist friend for publication back East, Birney praised Finney and predicted that the appalling new Ohio law would be “totally inoperative.”<sup>132</sup> The editors of the *Oberlin Evangelist* agreed, calling the bill, among other things, something “contrary to the law of nature, contrary to the law of God, contrary to all righteous municipal or civil laws, contrary to the constitution of Ohio, and contrary to the constitution of the United States.” They opined that it would be “wholly inoperative while it exists, and will be speedily abolished.”<sup>133</sup>

### ***“THE PATH STRAIGHT FORWARD”***

Politically, the demonstration of Ohio’s subservience to the Kentucky Slave Power ultimately caused mass confusion among most politically-minded Ohio abolitionists. Western Reserve Whigs would have loved to excise any of their party members who voted for the fugitive bill. However, their power was limited, and the renomination of Benjamin Wade to the state legislature was almost upset by the obstinacy of non-abolitionist Whigs from the southern part of the state.<sup>134</sup> Democrats rolled to even more dominating majorities statewide, yet the abolitionists could not claim responsibility for the landslide as they had a year earlier. This time around, their

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<sup>131</sup> *Report of the Fourth Anniversary of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society*, 16-19; See also *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 17, 1839; James G. Birney to Joshua Leavitt, May 31, 1839, in *Liberator*, June 28, 1839.

<sup>132</sup> James G. Birney to Joshua Leavitt, May 31, 1839, in *Liberator*, June 28, 1839.

<sup>133</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 3, 1839; *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 14, 1839.

<sup>134</sup> See Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom*, 31-32.



votes had been split between the two parties or withheld altogether in frustration. Democrats had proven untrustworthy after their abuse of Thomas Morris. Whigs had not made a better showing as many of them lined up in support of the fugitive slave law and laughed at abolitionists who had been “gulled” by the Democracy in 1838.<sup>135</sup>

Taking advantage of their increased majorities in the Ohio legislature, the state Democratic convention in January of 1840 set the tone for the coming session by condemning abolition societies.<sup>136</sup> The Ohio House resolved later that month that they considered “the unlawful, unwise, and unconstitutional interference of the fanatical abolitionists of the north with the domestic institutions of the southern states as highly criminal,” and that all good citizens were duty bound to denounce the abolitionists “in their mad, fanatical and revolutionary schemes.”<sup>137</sup> They went on to declare that “the conduct of the abolitionist is calculated to incite insurrection among the slaves, and is (if not directly) indirectly a guarantee on the part of the abolitionist, to assist the slaves in the indiscriminate butchery and murder of the slave-holders.”<sup>138</sup>

It was within this atmosphere that the Oberlin Dialectic Association, a student literary society, sought incorporation from the legislature early in the session. Their bid was soundly defeated, but ambitious House members also used the opportunity to “distinguish[ ] themselves by their opposition.” They urged several amendments, including one to prohibit abolition lectures within the society, and another, proposed by Knox county Democrat Byram Leonard, to strike the word “Oberlin” from wherever it appeared in the documents of incorporation and replace it with the word “Abolition.” This, he said, would satisfy his desire to avoid having the statute book

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<sup>135</sup> *Emancipator*, October 24, 1839; See also *Philanthropist*, January 29, 1839; Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom*, 29.

<sup>136</sup> *Norwalk Experiment*, January 22, 1840; See also Finney, *Memoirs*, 387.

<sup>137</sup> *Philanthropist*, January 21, 1840; *Liberator*, February 14, 1840.

<sup>138</sup> *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Ohio, Being the First Session of the Thirty Eighth General Assembly, Held in the City of Columbus, Commencing on Monday, December 5, 1839 (Columbus, 1840)*, 189, 212.

“disgraced” by the name Oberlin, and simultaneously make it easier for readers to understand “what institution was meant.”<sup>139</sup> Leonard went on to declare that he “did not like the knowledge that emanated from that institution,” since it “sent out scholars, who as school teachers, instilled their abolition doctrines into the minds of our children.”<sup>140</sup>

After another legislative session emphasized the inadequacy of the Ohio abolitionists’ vague political strategy, some were finally ready to take the next step towards organized political action. Oberlin students and townsmen busied themselves debating these vital points.<sup>141</sup> By now, there was little question in their minds about the propriety of voting, yet what seemed a forgone conclusion in Oberlin and the Northwest was doing its part to rend the Eastern movement in two. However, as the Garrisonians battled James G. Birney, Henry B. Stanton, the Tappans, and the rest of the political faction back East, the same issue hardly induced any debate in the West.<sup>142</sup> A July meeting of the Oberlin-led Lorain County Anti-Slavery Society had already resolved that “it is the duty of abolitionists to use their influence to secure the

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<sup>139</sup> *Philanthropist*, December 31, 1839; January 21, 1840; *Liberator*, February 14, 1840.

<sup>140</sup> *Philanthropist*, January 21, 1840; *Liberator*, February 14, 1840. Still, the bill passed without Leonard’s peculiar edits.

<sup>141</sup> Dialectic Association Minutes, March 11, 1840, RG 30/24, Box 11, Folder 15, OCA; L.L. Rice, “Talk re: Slavery,” April, 1841, Robert S. Fletcher papers, RG 30/24, Box 3, Folder 10, OCA.

<sup>142</sup> The main difference between Garrisonians and the politically-minded abolitionists was basically over expediency rather than principle. All abolitionists agreed that both the Whig and Democratic Parties were corrupt beyond repair and in cahoots with the Slave Power. However, Garrison located the cause of the corruption in the populace—the people who made up the parties. Only after a thorough reformation of public opinion could the parties and the political system be reformed. He believed that abolitionists must stay aloof from politics, remaining among the electorate to spur them on to greater radicalism rather than attempting to lead them before they were sufficiently prepared to follow. Though his personal beliefs precluded voting until the 1860s, Garrison did not go so far as to require nonresistance as a condition of membership in abolitionist societies, and he believed that abolitionists who did vote would be best served by either scattering their votes or remaining independent. See Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism*, 159-160; Ronald Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism After 1830* (Baltimore, 1976), 13.

nomination for office of men who are the friends of equal rights,” and that “it is their duty to attend the polls and vote for such men.”<sup>143</sup>

Assuming that they would vote *somehow*, Western abolitionists were forced to confront two other questions by the rapid approach of the 1840 presidential election. Could abolitionists cast their votes for anyone except a declared abolitionist? The Lorain County Anti-Slavery Society, boldly offered their opinion in no uncertain terms that they could not. “To give your suffrage for a man who denies the fundamental principles of free government,” the Society declared, “is one of the grossest absurdities. As well might you employ an agent to manage your property who did not recognize your right to such property. This would betray a mental imbecility.”<sup>144</sup> Still though, the second great question was what was to be done if Martin Van Buren were pitted against the likes of a Henry Clay or William Henry Harrison, all proslavery men, for the highest office in the land?

An attempt to resolve the issue was made at an August 1839 American Anti-Slavery Society convention at Albany, New York, specifically called to address “the questions which relate to the proper exercise of the suffrage by citizens of the free States.”<sup>145</sup> After a long and animated debate the assembly resolved to neither vote for nor support the election of any man to public office who was not in favor of the immediate abolitionist of slavery.<sup>146</sup> The *Philanthropist* called this resolution “wrong in principle and inexpedient” since, the editor claimed, it demanded entirely arbitrary qualifications in a candidate. Rather, editor Gamaliel Bailey believed that

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<sup>143</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 17, 1839, July 31, 1839; *Emancipator*, July 25, 1839; Geraldine Hopkins, *Garrisonian Abolition vs. Oberlin Anti-Slavery*, Unpublished honors paper, University of Northern Illinois (1929), 45-46.; Burroughs, “Oberlin’s Part in the Slavery Controversy,” 278.

<sup>144</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 17, 1839, July 31, 1839.

<sup>145</sup> *Emancipator*, August 8, 1839.

<sup>146</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 28, 1839; Joseph G. Rayback, “The Liberty Party Leaders of Ohio: Exponents of Anti-Slavery Coalition,” *Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, Vol.LVII (1948), 165.

“requirements should be limited by the constitutional responsibilities of the office they seek.” More damaging was the paper’s claim that the stand of the Society would actually disfranchise abolitionists.<sup>147</sup> Many Ohio societies followed this position by resolving to demand only such pledges as candidates could be reasonably expected to offer. Local conventions in Huron, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Ashtabula, Portage, and Clinton counties, joined with a general Western Reserve convention in resolving “That abolitionists ought not, and we *will not*, vote for any man for any legislative or executive office who is not heartily opposed to slavery and who will not openly meet and honestly sustain all constitutional measures calculated immediately to restore to the oppressed their rights.”<sup>148</sup>

However, voices from the Oberlin community chimed in later that month by sustaining the Albany convention’s unequivocal stance on voting. The editors of the *Oberlin Evangelist* declared that “The cause of righteousness has received a new impulse from this [Albany] convention.” “In view of the results,” the editors concluded, “we ought to take courage—take courage in cleaving close to the Lord, and in more abundant labors in this, his cause.” The resolutions offered at the Albany Convention were not unrealistic, but rather as firm as they must be for consistency in their Christianity and successful antislavery results.<sup>149</sup> ““Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do,” Oberlinites were fond of repeating, “do it with thy might.””<sup>150</sup>

Still the quandary of what to do with two equally unsuitable candidates remained. On October 23, 1839, a special meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society convened in Cleveland, and the question of the hour could not be avoided.<sup>151</sup> Of the four hundred abolitionists in attendance, a powerful majority were from Ohio,

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<sup>147</sup> *Philanthropist*, September 3, 1839.

<sup>148</sup> *Philanthropist*, October 8, 1839; See also Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom*, 45-47.

<sup>149</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 17, 1839.

<sup>150</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 28, 1839.

<sup>151</sup> See call for the Cleveland convention in *Friend of Man*, September 11, 1839.

including, as one Democratic paper sarcastically remarked, “all the black and white negroes of Oberlin...headed by Mahand and Fininey [sic] of the Oberlin Institute.”<sup>152</sup> These Oberlinites had publicly avowed that they hoped to “rescue the political power of this country from the hands of the present [Democratic] party.”<sup>153</sup> After the sessions were opened with a prayer from Mahan, several Garrisonians presented an argument to deny the propriety of any sort of political action. After a “long and zealously devised” rebuttal by Oberlin delegates Mahan, Finney, and Edward Wade, two resolutions were offered and adopted by an overwhelming majority: first, to vote for no opponents of abolitionism; second, to “neglect no opportunity to record their votes against slavery when proper candidates in all respects are put up for office.”<sup>154</sup>

New Yorker Myron Holley’s resolution was more radical. It demanded that when existing parties directly opposed or purposefully overlooked the rights of the slave, it was time to form “a *new political party*,” of which the candidates for President and Vice President would be nominated by a specially appointed committee. After a full day’s debate, Holley’s resolutions were tabled. Mahan and Edward Wade then offered their support of an amendment that authorized the calling of a nominating convention, providing the nominees of the two major parties proved unacceptable. However, this too was blocked.<sup>155</sup>

Henry B. Stanton called these deliberations some of the most interesting debates on political action that he had ever witnessed, despite the fact that the overall sentiment was against independent nominations under the then-current

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<sup>152</sup> *Ohio Statesman*, November 6, 1839; *Philanthropist*, November 5, 1839.

<sup>153</sup> *Ohio Statesman*, November 6, 1839.

<sup>154</sup> *Liberator*, November 15, 22, 1839; Henry B. Stanton to John Greenleaf Whittier, October 20, 1839, in *Philanthropist*, November 19, 1839; *Ohio Statesman*, November 6, 1839.

<sup>155</sup> *Liberator*, November 15, 22, 1839; Henry B. Stanton to John Greenleaf Whittier, October 20, 1839, in *Philanthropist*, November 19, 1839.

circumstances.<sup>156</sup> However, Elizur Wright, Sr., father of the American Anti-Slavery Society Secretary, thought a great opportunity had been missed. He had brought a group of sixteen Oberlin students to the convention, and believed that Holley's resolution would have passed if "a few aspiring ones [among the delegates] who are seeking promotion" from Eastern abolitionist leaders had not been afraid to support such a controversial issue. "I think," Wright wrote, "that these gentlemen have yet to learn that the path *straight forward* is the road to honor."<sup>157</sup>

The final show of support for Holley's resolution was also undertaken without the defense of the man who could have been one of its most able advocates. Finney, the acknowledged leader of the significant Oberlin contingent to the convention, was forced to leave Cleveland before the Holley resolution or the proposed amendment was thoroughly discussed and voted upon. Before being called away, Finney admitted that he was ready to defend the resolution since he could not personally "vote for an enemy of God & man to legislate for any people." Though in disgust he had often remained aloof of politics in the past when there was no suitable candidate, Finney declared that he would go to the polls if an antislavery party was able to produce an ideologically consistent abolitionist candidate.<sup>158</sup>

From the East, Garrisonians cried foul, accusing the political faction of trickery and attempting to pack the convention with political Westerners. Even the Cincinnati *Philanthropist* admitted that it seemed unreasonable to project the organization of a party on the basis of exclusive attention to any single interest, however important. Critics identified a logical flaw in the argument of Holley and others. They were

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<sup>156</sup> Henry B. Stanton to John Greenleaf Whittier, October 20, 1839, in *Philanthropist*, November 19, 1839.

<sup>157</sup> Elizur Wright, Sr. to Elizur Wright, Jr., November 6, 1839, Elizur Wright papers, Case Western Reserve University Archives, Series 2IW2, Box 1, Folder 4; See also Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom*, 57; Reilley, *The Early Slavery Controversy*, 203.

<sup>158</sup> Charles G. Finney to Gerrit Smith, July 22, 1840, RG 30/24, Box 6, Folder 7, OCA. Not all Oberlin abolitionists were fully behind such measures at that point. See *Oberlin Evangelist*, November 6, 1839.

accused of attempting to turn the American Anti-Slavery Society into a political party, yet by the founding principles of the Society, such a transformation was impossible. The primary object of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833 had been the abolition of slavery in the states, and it had grudgingly admitted the inability of Congress to directly act outside of territory it controlled. The *Philanthropist* argued that a national political party contemplating as its main object the abolition of slavery on the state level was a manifest absurdity.<sup>159</sup>

However, on November 13, a convention in Warsaw, New York led by Myron Holley formally nominated James G. Birney and Francis J. Lemoyne to head an independent abolitionist ticket in the 1840 presidential race. Both men declined the nomination. Though Birney told the convention that he fully agreed with them that “the great anti-slavery enterprise can never succeed without independent nominations,” he still felt that the views of abolitionists on the whole were not yet favorable enough to make such a measure desirable.<sup>160</sup>

Birney and Holley bided their time. By the first few weeks of 1840, the exasperating notion of the Whig ticket led by the slaveholder Harrison against the incumbent Democrat Van Buren was leading many who had formerly questioned the wisdom of independent action to reexamine their views.<sup>161</sup> In February, Holley issued a call for a “National Third-Party Anti-Slavery Convention” to meet in April.<sup>162</sup> Though the *Philanthropist* remained cool to the idea of political action, many of the letters it received from its subscribers betrayed a developing momentum in the opposite direction.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> *Philanthropist*, December 10, 1839.

<sup>160</sup> *Philanthropist*, January 1, 1840.

<sup>161</sup> See letters in *Philanthropist*, January 21, February 25, April 14, 1840.

<sup>162</sup> See *Philanthropist*, February 18, 1840.

<sup>163</sup> See *Philanthropist*, April 14, 1840.

On April 1, the convention met, though more than nine tenths of the delegates were from New York State. Birney was again nominated for the Presidency, with Thomas Earle of Pennsylvania filling out the ticket. However, with Ohio only represented by some of its closest New York friends like William Goodell and Alvan Stewart and by the correspondence of some of its citizens, the *Philanthropist* warned its readers not to get “carried away” in the new movement or too caught up in the excitement.<sup>164</sup>



**Illustration 5.1: James Gillespie Birney**  
(from W. Birney, *James G. Birney and His Times* (1890))

Still, the only true objection, apart from the ideological ones of the nonresistant Garrisonians, was mainly based on pragmatism. Realistic abolitionists believed that a third party foray was destined to go down to defeat, and likely a resounding one at

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<sup>164</sup> *Philanthropist*, April 21, 28, 1840.



that. If abolitionists concentrated their votes into a losing minority cause, the other parties would have absolutely no reason to court the favor of antislavery men or make any concessions with regard to slavery. However, by voting as a bloc for those candidates they considered friends of the slave, abolitionists might hold the balance of power in close elections and thus represent the votes that could force Whigs or Democrats to concede to some of their demands. Opponents of the new abolitionist party deplored the choice they were presented in Van Buren or Harrison, yet they believed an independent nomination was tactically the worst thing they could do tactically.

In opposing the Albany nominations, Gamaliel Bailey admitted that he acted against his own feelings; he simply had to obey the dictates of his best judgment. Indeed, he was so passionately estranged from both main parties, opposed to the institution of slavery in the South, and desirous of successful independent action, that only its near guarantee of overwhelming defeat kept him from supporting the enterprise “heart and soul.”<sup>165</sup> For men like the *Philanthropist*’s editor, it was a trying time, as the “Tippecanoe and Tyler Too” fever reached a dangerous pitch. With no officially sanctioned outlet for their suffrage, progressive voters were forced to weigh the desire to send Van Buren back to New York, defeat the subtreasury, and register their opinions on the national bank and tariff with the wish to satisfy their most inner conscience by voting for an abolitionist “nominated by a corporal’s guard as a forlorn hope.”<sup>166</sup>

The Oberlin community offered their town and college as a forum to debate the wisdom of running a third party ticket in the upcoming national election. Public

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<sup>165</sup> *Philanthropist*, April 28, 1840.

<sup>166</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, April 22, 1840; *Philanthropist*, April 28, 1840; Smith, *Liberty and Free Soil Parties*, 38

debates on the issue were held just days after the April nominations.<sup>167</sup> The editors of the *Oberlin Evangelist* weighed in by admitting the inevitability of “the last resort” in an editorial titled “Alarming Facts—The Slave Power Triumphant,” and urged their readers to either cast their votes for Birney and Earle or avoid voting altogether. Neither regular party seemed willing to resist slavery, “the common enemy of all the rights purchased at such an expenditure of treasure and blood, this common enemy of the peace and the public prosperity, this common enemy of the Constitution and the Union.”<sup>168</sup> Moreover, not all abolitionists from Oberlin considered an independent party loss a forgone conclusion. Writing from England, John Keep expressed to his wife the pleasure he would take in bragging to his English friends about the great changes that would follow the election when Birney and the new party supplanted the Democrats and Whigs, “each charging the other as a crime, that it is friendly to Abolition!!!”<sup>169</sup> Whatever their path, Professor James Fairchild was confident that “the Oberlin vote could always be depended on where it would tell against the pro-slavery attitude of the government.”<sup>170</sup>

On September 1, 1840, in “a fine specimen of the *real* abolitionism in Ohio,” the state’s first Liberty Party convention convened.<sup>171</sup> As Richard Sewell argues, the formation of an independent political party dedicated to the overthrow of slavery was a distinct possibility, and in states like Ohio and New York, whose abolitionists had led in the move towards organized politics, the development seemed inescapable. Once abolitionists clearly understood their duties to show principled consistency at the

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<sup>167</sup> Dialectic Association Minutes, April 22, 1840, RG 30/24, FP, Box 11, Folder 15, OCA; Edmund A. West to “Aunt Cornelia,” June 1, 1840, RG 30/24, FP, Box 3, Folder 26, OCA; L.L. Rice, “Talk re: Slavery,” April, 1841, RG 30/24, FP, Box 3, Folder 10, OCA.

<sup>168</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 29, 1840.

<sup>169</sup> John Keep to Lydia H. Keep, July 12, 1840, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 3, OCA.

<sup>170</sup> Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 110.

<sup>171</sup> *Friend of Man*, September 16, 1840; See also Archer H. Shaw, *The Plain Dealer: One Hundred Years in Cleveland* (New York, 1942), 75.

polls and cast their votes only for committed enemies of slavery, the organization of an independent political body that would guarantee abolitionists a supply of suitable candidates and offer a vehicle for unified political action seemed both logical and, for many, irresistible.<sup>172</sup>

Almost two hundred political abolitionists gathered and voted, by an almost two to one margin, that both the Whig Harrison and Democrat Van Buren had “forfeited all claims” to abolitionist support. Van Buren’s apparent allegiance to the Slave Power had long been a forgone conclusion to many Ohioans, and after the *Oberlin Evangelist* ran a three page expose on Harrison’s fundamental proslavery orientation, “as orthodox on the subject...as Mr. Van Buren,” abolitionists could not help but agree that both candidates for the presidency presented “a most humiliating spectacle.”<sup>173</sup> That being the case, the state convention voted to back the national Liberty Party’s ticket of Birney and Earl.<sup>174</sup> In doing so they subscribed to a platform that the Oberlin community had stood firmly upon since at least 1835: an endorsement of the principle of immediatism, the acknowledgement of Congressional power to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia and the Territories, and the general opposition to human slavery “to the full extent of Constitutional power.”<sup>175</sup> The *Philanthropist* also fell into line, enthusiastically jumping into the cause. Despite the editor’s fear of failure, the *Philanthropist* began flying the names of Birney and Earle from its masthead.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom*, 43.

<sup>173</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 29, 1840; See also *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 23, 1840.

<sup>174</sup> *Philanthropist*, September 8, 1840; Roseboom and Weisenberger, *History of the State of Ohio*, 385-386.

<sup>175</sup> *National Party Platforms of the United States Presidential Candidates, Electoral and Popular Votes*, ed. J.M.H. Frederick (Akron, 1896), 13.

<sup>176</sup> Rayback, “The Liberty Party Leaders of Ohio,” 169.

Nonetheless, the “Tippecanoe and Tyler Too” and “hard cider and log cabins” hullabaloo retained a disconcerting hold on Ohio’s Whig antislavery politicians.<sup>177</sup> With few exceptions, many of the most powerful antislavery politicians, the individuals one historian describes as the men who would soon represent “the personification of political abolitionism” were not yet ready to break ranks with their old party in 1840.<sup>178</sup> Giddings, Benjamin F. and Edward Wade, Leister King, Samuel Lewis, and Salmon P. Chase all threw their support to Harrison in the 1840 contest. Even the Western Reserve majority voted Whig.<sup>179</sup>

Some Oberlinites blamed the Whig faithful for wrecking the abolitionist cause in the election. “The Whig candidates for Congress,” one wrote, “did us more harm than any other men on the Reserve. They had nothing to fear for themselves and stumped it for Harrison, for weeks, throwing out insinuations against [the Liberty Party] as an affair got up in certain quarters to help Van Buren, &c.”<sup>180</sup> And though the majority of Oberlinites supported the independent Liberty Party ticket in 1840, there was still a Whig presence in the town.<sup>181</sup> Professor Henry Cowles, who abandoned the party that year, had to forbid his son from attending a Whig parade that marched from Wellington and through Oberlin with a brass band at its head. A group of Oberlin *women* had joined in the procession, causing one partisan to note that “the *ladies* are not backward in the good cause.”<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> “Sara” to Betsey Mix Cowles, October 6, 1840, Betsey Mix Cowles Papers, Box 2, Western Reserve Historical Society (hereafter WRHS); *The Ohio Almanac*, ed. Damaine Vonada, (Wilmington, 1992), 114-117; See also *Lorain Standard*, October 20, 1840.

<sup>178</sup> Smith, *Liberty and Free Soil Parties*, 40.

<sup>179</sup> Edmund A. West to “Aunt Cornelia” Johnson, June 1, 1840, September 19, 1840, RG 30/24, FP, Box 3, Folder 26, OCA; Roseboom and Weisenberger, *History of the State of Ohio*, 385-386; *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 31, 1839; Douglas A. Gamble, “Joshua Giddings and the Ohio Abolitionists: A Study in Radical Politics.” *Ohio History*, Vol.88 (1978), 41; Archer H. Shaw, *The Plain Dealer, One Hundred Years in Cleveland* (New York, 1942), 76; Seth Hinshaw, *Ohio Elects the President: Our State’s Role in Presidential Elections, 1804-1996* (Manfield, 2000), 24-25.

<sup>180</sup> *Philanthropist*, December 9, 1840.

<sup>181</sup> Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 109-110; *Lorain Republican*, April 4, 1844.

<sup>182</sup> John G.W. Cowles, “Address at the Presentation of a Portrait Of Henry Cowles, Commencement, 1900,” RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 12, OCA; “Sara” to Betsey Mix Cowles, October 6, 1840, Betsey

In Oberlin, the main reason *not* to follow one's conscience by casting a Liberty ballot continued to be practicality. Their ethical obligation to vote had already been established, and Finney reminded them that year that "in a popular government, politics are an indispensable part of religion."<sup>183</sup> However, he did not provide instruction on who to vote *for*. To be sure, there was never any possibility of Oberlin going for a candidate with a demonstrated pro-slavery orientation (like Van Buren in 1840), and though Oberlin was largely abolitionized, some voters still realized that the Liberty Party had no hope of victory. Accordingly, they viewed the contest as a battle for the least of two evils. Out of the two major party candidates, one was surely going to win, and only by justifying their ballot as a vote *against* Van Buren rather than *for* Harrison could Oberlin Whigs deflect the implications inherent in the declaration of many abolitionists that a Harrison vote itself was a sin.<sup>184</sup> Perhaps a handful of conflicted Oberlin voters did as one minister quoted in the *Oberlin Evangelist* did when he announced to his congregation that "I shall vote for —, and I trust God will forgive me for so doing."<sup>185</sup>

When the votes were counted in Ohio, it was clear that many antislavery vacillators had ultimately remained with their old party. Since the third party did not make any nominations apart from their presidential ticket, many abolitionists who had formerly voted Whig brought Whig ballots to the polls without also scratching out Harrison's name at the head of the ticket. Many others, intent on voting for Birney, could not find the appropriate ballots or did not know the names of the third party electors. Others simply stayed home and left the commotion of Election Day to

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Mix Cowles Papers, Box 2, WRHS; Edmund A. West to Aunt Cornelia Johnson, September 19, 1840, RG 30/24, FP, Box 3, Folder 26, OCA.

<sup>183</sup> Finney, *Skeletons of a Course of Theological Lectures*, 241.

<sup>184</sup> [?] Blanchard to Henry Cowles, August 4, 1840, Henry Cowles Papers, RG 30/27, Box 2, OCA.

<sup>185</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, October 9, 1844.

someone else.<sup>186</sup> In Ohio, only 1/3 of 1% of the voters cast ballots for the abolitionists. Overall, national returns showed that not one in ten of the thousands of real abolitionists who had resolved to act without regard to party ties actually cut those connections.<sup>187</sup> Locally, Democrats accused the Ohio abolitionists of lacking any semblance of consistency or honesty for not supporting the ticket they themselves had nominated, and for offering only “a beggarly account of empty boxes.”<sup>188</sup>

To be sure, Birney’s 902 Ohio votes in the election were a far cry from what political abolitionists had originally desired. However, they were not overly disheartened, since a foundation for further antislavery political action had been established. “Where,” asked the editors of the *Oberlin Evangelist*, “is the man of this ‘glorious minority’ who regrets his vote? We have heard of none.”<sup>189</sup> The returns from Lorain County, of which Oberlin was a significant part, were a major reason that the ten counties of the Western Reserve cast almost a full half of the state Liberty Party total. This geographic concentration of votes reflected both the foundation of a body of antislavery voters in Ohio as well as a clear indication of the future course of antislavery growth in the state.<sup>190</sup>

Moreover, despite their seemingly small numbers, Ohio’s third party voters now represented a powerful voting bloc. By 1840, Ohio had emerged as one of the most crucial states in the battle over slavery between the free and slave states. It was the third most populous state in the nation, and in that year, Ohio cast more electoral votes than all other Midwestern states combined.<sup>191</sup> However, from the 1830s through

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<sup>186</sup> Shaw, *The Plain Dealer*, 76; Hinshaw, *Ohio Elects the President*, 24-25; Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom*, 41.

<sup>187</sup> This is based on Elizur Wright’s estimate of 70,000 voting abolitionists. See Elizur Wright, *Myron Holley and What He Did for Liberty and True Religion* (Boston, 1852), 235; Shaw, *The Plain Dealer*, 76; (Gettysburg) *Republican Compiler*, December 1, 1840.

<sup>188</sup> (Elyria) *Independent Treasury*, December 22, 1841, January 5, September 21, 1842.

<sup>189</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 2, 1840; Roseboom and Weisenberger, *The History of the State of Ohio*, 386; See also *Oberlin Evangelist*, June 9, 1841.

<sup>190</sup> Smith, *Liberty and Free Soil Parties*, 47; (Gettysburg) *Republican Compiler*, December 1, 1840.

<sup>191</sup> See Hazard’s *United States Commercial and Statistical Register* (Philadelphia), May 4, 1842.

the early 1850s, control of the state legislature was generally shared evenly between Democrats and Whigs.<sup>192</sup> Several instances of abolitionists affecting the results of Ohio elections have already been mentioned, but the birth of a party that potentially held the balance of power in one of the most important states in the union raised eyebrows among the political establishment. Because of abolition, Ohio's third party voters, led by Oberlin and the Western Reserve, were a force to be reckoned with in state politics long before they ever polled a plurality in any election.

Accordingly, the inauspicious beginning of the national Liberty Party effort did not scare away those who had cast ballots for Birney and Earle in 1840. The *Oberlin Evangelist* declared that every one of the Ohio Liberty Party voters of 1840 could “*be depended upon...in the coming struggle.*”<sup>193</sup> Slavery had proven itself a fixture in the American political system, and since Liberty Party abolitionists felt a moral imperative to participate in the process, the third party offered them the best path towards their goal of immediate emancipation.<sup>194</sup> Oberlin's leaders already predicted an energized Western Reserve where enthusiastic Liberty Party conventions would be attended by more “than the whole Freeman's vote in Ohio” of 1840.<sup>195</sup>

These earliest Liberty Party men were firm in their abolitionist values, and continued to see the third party as an effective way to reconcile moral suasion and political action. Many drew a parallel between their ideas of entire sanctification and antislavery voting. As Douglas Strong argues, a vote for abolition recorded a person's spiritual choice against sin and in support of holiness. A Liberty Party ballot, he writes, “became a practical and definitive way for ecclesiastical abolitionists to exhibit

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<sup>192</sup> From 1832 to 1853, Democrats polled an average of 48.9 percent of Ohio's votes while the Whigs gathered 47.3. See Volpe, *Forlorn Hope of Freedom*, xix, 150n27.

<sup>193</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 2, 1840.

<sup>194</sup> See L.L. Rice, “Talk re: Slavery,” April, 1841, RG 30/24, FP, Box 3, Folder 10, OCA.

<sup>195</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 2, 1840.

their sanctified resolve.”<sup>196</sup> The *Oberlin Evangelist* suggested as much when its editor unashamedly commended the “seven thousand men did not bow the knee to Baal” in the 1840 election.<sup>197</sup> “Passing events are pregnant with omens of promise,” Professor Henry Cowles declared in the aftermath of the election, “and a thousand eyes are striving to pierce the destinies of the future.”<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Strong, *Perfectionist Politics*, 4.

<sup>197</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 1, 1843

<sup>198</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 17, 1841.



## CHAPTER SIX

### *“All the truly wise or truly pious have the same end in view”: Oberlin and Abolitionist Schism*

By the late 1830s, the success and popularization of the American abolitionist movement was reaching new highs, and the Oberlin community was in the vanguard. Petition campaigns and the continuing proliferation of state and local antislavery societies were bringing the antislavery message to more people than ever. However, this growth and expansion also contained within it the seeds of discord. Reformers weighed the value of moral suasion in their agitation, and those who found it insufficient as an antislavery tactic began to consider new means and to set new goals in the fight against slavery. Others began to expand abolitionism to a program of universal emancipation from all unjust inequalities. As abolitionists' reform agendas diverged, the possibility of enduring antislavery unity increasingly seemed more unlikely. Eastern leaders including William Lloyd Garrison, Lewis and Arthur Tappan, and James G. Birney became embroiled in internal ideological and personal battles that led to the dramatic division of the American Anti-Slavery Society in May of 1840.

However, away from the East Coast, the schism among abolitionists was not felt nearly as acutely. The ideological heterogeneity that Oberlinites had encouraged and many others had adopted had helped Ohio and the West grow into a fecund abolitionist stronghold to rival New York and New England was much better able to accommodate the differences that shattered antislavery unity in 1837-1840. Even before Oberlin professor John Morgan led the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society to a position of neutrality relative to the warring Eastern abolitionist factions in June of 1840, reformers from the Oberlin community had sought to make abolitionism acceptable to

the widest constituency possible. Though this may have been at the expense of strict ideological consistency, these men and women hoped to avoid being side-tracked by debates over “proper” or “pure” means by prioritizing the ultimate goal of emancipation.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, this approach was moderate compared to the most radical abolitionists of the era. Still, Oberlinites and those like them appreciated their responsibility of bringing the growing antislavery forces in line behind the radical shock troops. As one close friend of the Oberlin community from the Western Reserve declared to a group of Garrisonians, “You beat the bush...and I will catch the birds.”<sup>2</sup>

### **“THE OBERLIN”**

British abolitionist Harriett Martineau had gone to great lengths to publicize the vital leadership in the antislavery movement of her American friends connected to what she simply called “the Oberlin.” By the time the college’s emissaries John Keep and William Dawes reached England in late 1839, their school and community represented to many there the great hope of abolitionism and human rights in America.<sup>3</sup> Their arrival was followed a few months later by “An Expression of

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<sup>1</sup> Despite what many historians have asserted, Oberlin did not “side” with either abolitionist faction after the split in 1840. Some have taken the financial connection between the Oberlin Institute and the Tappans as proof of allegiance, but this was not the case. In fact, the Tappans’ support of the Oberlin Institute had mostly dried up after the panic of 1837, and even when Lewis Tappan was again able to donate money to the school, he was not among the top donors. There was no sense among Oberlinites that the Tappans had “bought” their support or that past donations demanded perpetual loyalty. Though the Oberlin community was probably situated closer to the Tappanites than Garrisonians, their allegiance was to the slave. For works that claim strict loyalty on the part of Oberlinites to the Tappanite faction, see Anna M. Speicher, *The Religious World of Antislavery Women: Spirituality in the Lives of Five Abolitionist Lecturers* (Syracuse, 2000), 42-44; Linda L. Geary, *Balanced in the Wind: A Biography of Betsey Mix Cowles* (Lewisburg, 1989), 41; Dorothy Sterling, *Ahead of Her Time: Abby Kelley and the Politics of Antislavery* (New York, 1991), 231; James Oliver Horton, “Black Education at Oberlin College: A Controversial Commitment,” *Journal of Negro Education*, Vol.54, No.4 (Autumn, 1985), 482-483.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Johnson, *The Abolitionists Vindicated in a Review of Eli Thayer’s Paper on the New England Emigrant Aid Company* (Worcester, 1887), 24.

<sup>3</sup> John Keep to Lydia H. Keep, November 30, 1839, RG 30/24, Robert S. Fletcher papers (hereafter FP), Box 7, Folder 2, Oberlin College Archives (hereafter OCA); Harriett Martineau, *Harriet Martineau’s*

Sentiments of the Colored Students of the Oberlin Institution,” who felt it their duty to officially commend their school to British supporters and to thank those who offered their generous financial backing. The principles upon which the Oberlin Institute was conducted, they wrote, allowed them with “unshaken confidence” to endorse it as one of the most efficient means of elevating African Americans “from the state of moral degradation in which they have been placed by their oppressors.”<sup>4</sup> One British minister told Keep that “no doubt you have a good & Christian school at Oberlin- but this merely will not give you favor among us in England- for there are many important Christian schools in your Country & this.” Rather, it was Oberlin’s stand against the “abominable system of slavery” which would “excite the feelings of the Englishmen.”<sup>5</sup> British abolitionist patriarch Thomas Clarkson agreed, telling Dawes that “I trust that, God, in his providence, is opening a way, through the Oberlin Society, or that he will open a way, for the relief of the oppressed of our Fellow Creatures.”<sup>6</sup>

Keep encouraged the view of Oberlin as a universal stronghold rather than just an American institution, one that sought to “ameliorate the condition of all men” by standing “where Christ stood.”<sup>7</sup> The Oberlin enterprise, he told one English audience, “has been brought up by the peculiar exigencies of the times, & properly belongs to the world.” He admitted to his family back home that along with Dawes, he would

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*Autobiography*, Vol.II, ed. Maria Weston Chapman (Boston, 1877), 345-346; Harriett Martineau to Fanny Wedgwood, December 12, 1839, January 17, March 8, 1840, in *Harriet Martineau's Letters to Fanny Wedgwood*, ed. Elisabeth Sanders Arbuckle (Stanford, 1983), 22-32; See also Harriett Martineau, *The Martyr Age of the United States of America, with an Appeal on Behalf of the Oberlin Institute in Aid of the Abolition of Slavery* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, 1840). It was actually William Dawes who was responsible for the publication of Martineau’s famous *Martyr Age* book. She recalled in 1846 that she gave the manuscript to Dawes when he was in England, and he oversaw its printing. Harriet Martineau to J.B. Estlin, April 30, 1846, Marlene Dahl Merrill papers, RG 30/250, acc. 1995/142, Box 1, Folder 3, OCA.

<sup>4</sup> “An Expression of Sentiments of the Colored Students of the Oberlin Institution,” July 7, 1841, Marlene Dahl Merrill papers, RG 30/250, acc. 1995/142, Box 1, Folder 1, OCA.

<sup>5</sup> John Keep to Theodore J. Keep, August 5, 1839, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 2, OCA.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Clarkson to William Dawes, October 14, 1839, RG 16/5/3, Autograph file, OCA.

<sup>7</sup> John Keep to William Keep, November 2, 1839, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 2, OCA.

sometimes stay up until four in the morning organizing his thoughts and writing antislavery speeches on the Oberlin Institute's behalf.<sup>8</sup> Their efforts were not in vain, and resulted in \$30,000 of pledges from the school's supporters in England, and even the memorialization in verse by a young man in Derby:

America needs you,  
Ye heroes arise and gird you anew for the strife,  
For her falls have re-echoed the groans of the slave,  
Her rivers have swallowed his life,  
Her forests & prairies no refuge afford,  
Excepting one holy spot:  
'Tis Oberlin's walls;  
The only retreat where the white man injures him not.<sup>9</sup>

While in England, the two Oberlin men also made a memorable appearance at the inaugural 1840 World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London. Keep made several speeches during the convention, routinely condemning the "accursed and most abominable slave system of the United States," and also touted the Oberlin Institute, "a new seminary," where "the black man is invited, and where he is received to the full enjoyment of the same equal privileges with the white man." Importantly, he informed the attentive convention that in Oberlin, they were training an abolition phalanx to reach out to the nation's African American population, "sympathize with

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<sup>8</sup> John Keep to Theodore Keep, November 19, 1839, Charles Grandison Finney papers, Microfilm, OCA.

<sup>9</sup> "Mr. Richardson," Derby, "Suggested on hearing the Revd. J. Keep lecture on American Slavery," June, 1840, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 3, OCA; Robert S. Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College: From its Foundation Through the Civil War* (Oberlin, 1943), 468. The funds Keep and Dawes raised in 18 months in England were a huge amount of money for the Oberlin Institute. To put the amount into perspective, Oberlin's entire endowment in 1883 was less than \$90,000. See James H. Fairchild, *Oberlin: The Colony and the College* (1883), 55.

him, stay with him, weep over him, pray with him, teach him, comfort him, pour oil into his wounds, and raise him to the dignity of a man.”<sup>10</sup>



**Illustration 6.1: the 1840 World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London (National Portrait Gallery; William Dawes is fourth from top left, and John Keep is directly below the upraised hand of speaker Thomas Clarkson)**

Although Keep and Dawes hoped to represent American abolitionism as a respectable religious enterprise, they regretted that most of the rest of the American delegation “did not appear well as *Christians*.” “Much harm,” Keep wrote, “has been

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<sup>10</sup> *Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention, Called by the Committee of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, and Held in London, from Friday, June 12<sup>th</sup>, to Tuesday, June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1840* (London, 1841), 138-143.

done by this.”<sup>11</sup> When the Executive Committee of the convention decided not to seat the female delegates from the United States, Garrisonians cried foul, publicly calling the officers “enemies of freedom” and promising to let loose a “moral hurricane” if all delegates were not welcomed on equal terms.<sup>12</sup> A spirited debate ensued on the convention floor. Wendell Phillips and George Thompson argued for inclusion, while James G. Birney, one of the Garrisonians’ most vocal opponents on the political question at home, disputed the Americans’ right to dictate procedural matters at a British convention. Though an occasional English voice was heard, the most vociferous contest on the first day of the convention was among Americans, disputing many of the same issues which divided them across the Atlantic.<sup>13</sup>

At tea following one day’s deliberations, Keep observed that Garrison and Stanton “were injudicious in introducing some things not appropriate.” Garrison “brought forward some of his peculiar views & made much confusion,” and criticized a long history of “English foibles.” The once-friendly gathering was then overcome by an “uproar” which Keep described as “so great that no one could hear him [Garrison], for 10 or 15 minutes- & yet on he went & had his say out.” Stanton also attempted to force his partisan ideas into the conversation. Keep wrote that “the effect of his speech & of Garrison’s was unhappy. I felt both ashamed & grieved.” Though no one recorded his exact words, some who heard Garrison’s harangue hoped they

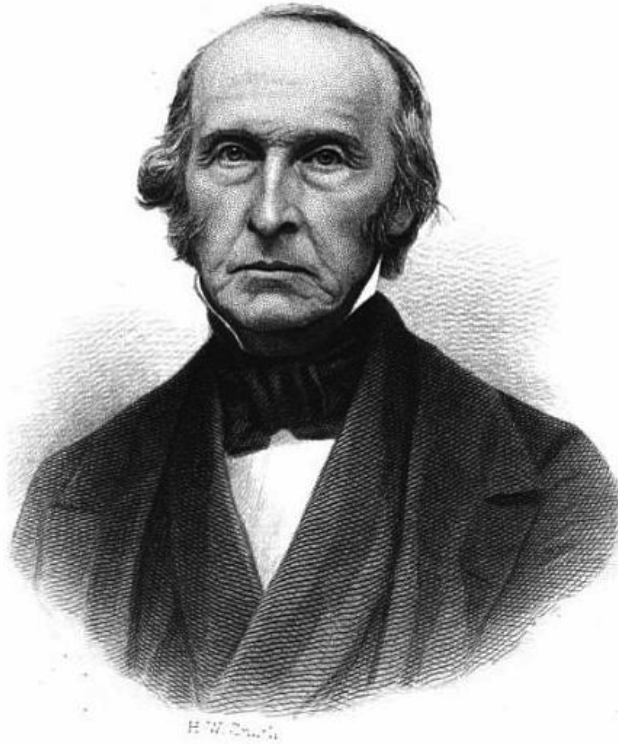
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<sup>11</sup> John Keep to Lydia H. Keep, March 15, 1840, FP, Box 7, Folder 2, OCA.

<sup>12</sup> Letter of Mr. N.P. Rodgers, n.d., in *Emancipator*, n.d., in *Liberator*, July 3, 1840.

<sup>13</sup> Wendell Phillips Garrison and Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison: The Story of his Life, Told by his Children*, Vol.II (New York, 1885), 366-382; William Lloyd Garrison to Oliver Johnson, July 3, 1840, in *Liberator*, July 24, 1840; See also *New York Evangelist*, June 25, 1840; *Liberator*, July 3, 10, 17, 24, 1840; William Lloyd Garrison to Helen E. Garrison, June 29, 1840, in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison: A House Dividing Against Itself 1836-1840*, Vol.II, ed. Walter M. Merrill and Louis Ruchames (Cambridge, 1971), 654-659; Henry Brewster Stanton, *Random Recollections* (New York, 1887), 75-81; James Haughton, *Memoir of James Haughton, with Extracts from his Private and Published Letters*, ed. Samuel Haughton (Dublin, 1877), 47-53; Douglas H. Maynard, “The World’s Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol.47 (December, 1960), 452-471. Garrison was not present for this debate, and would not arrive in London until the sixth day of the convention.

would never have to suffer through another meeting with him. Keep wrote to his wife that the “weak sides of the Abolitionists were seen—their dissensions, &c—Still I am inclined to *hope* that the effect was good.”<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 6.2: "Father" John Keep**  
(from Fairchild, *Oberlin: The Colony and the College* (1883))

However, the Oberlin delegation could not sugar-coat what was happening back in the United States. With the 1840 spring thaw in the Northeast, the American Anti-Slavery Society finally cracked. At the May anniversary meeting in New York City, the nomination of a woman, Abby Kelley, to the Business Committee capped the mounting inability of all abolitionists to work together under a single organization. Issues such as political action, women’s rights, nonresistance, and anticlericalism all combined in an ideological ferment which made a unified antislavery agenda all but impossible. Ministers could not stomach Garrison’s continuing attacks on the

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<sup>14</sup> John Keep to Lydia H. Keep, March 15, 1840, FP, RG 30/24, Box 7, Folder 2, OCA.

denominational church, and committed Garrisonians could not fellowship with men they were convinced were ultimately in league with slaveholders. Factions who espoused politics as the most promising method for emancipation and those who saw such political involvement as an accommodation with sin could find little common ground in the same society. A significant number of men under the leadership of Lewis Tappan withdrew to form the rival American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, or “New Org” as it would also be called.

Although the split appeared incredibly bitter and occasioned a war of words in the Eastern antislavery press, the fragmentation of the American Anti-Slavery Society only marked the end of a natural progression towards expansion and decentralization. Moreover, the breakup actually encouraged the growth of the abolitionist movement after 1840. As historian Ronald Walters rightly argues, rather than discouraging abolitionists or retarding the movement, the diversity of antislavery after 1840 actually encouraged the maximum number of people to enlist in the cause. It shifted the locus of antislavery activity away from the national society and to the local level, made leadership positions more accessible, and led to the creation of organizations to serve nearly every ideological opinion.<sup>15</sup>

New York abolitionist and Oberlin Institute parent William Goodell’s own account of the 1840 split is instructive. He wrote in 1852 about a single “unity of truth,” the shared goal of all abolitionists that slavery be brought to an end. “Abolitionism, before the division,” he said, “was a powerful elixir, in the phial of one anti-slavery organization, corked up tight, and carried about for exhibition.” By the split, “the phial was broken and the contents spilled over the whole surface of society, where it has been working as a leaven ever since, till the mass is beginning to upheave.” Had all abolitionists continued to be contained in a single, well-defined

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<sup>15</sup> Ronald G. Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism After 1830* (Baltimore, 1978), 5.



body, their appeal to diverse communities would have been checked. However, just like Christianity had done, “when the disciples that were scattered abroad, went everywhere, preaching the word,” the “democratic principle in abolitionism underwent a democratic phase of development.”<sup>16</sup>

With the dispersion of abolitionists’ efforts, it became nearly impossible for one to avoid their influence. “No man,” Goodell wrote, “knew where to go to escape the infection.” Indeed, one could not elude it in the religious sect, nor in the political party. If a person cried out against abolitionism as “‘bigotry, priestcraft, and Puritanism,’ behold! There was the most rampant abolitionism at his elbow...If one sought, in view of this, to disparage abolitionism as heretical and infidel, behold! the gathering of an anti-slavery conference and prayer meeting met his vision.”<sup>17</sup> The supposed split ultimately represented abolitionists insisting on their own independence to promote antislavery by whatever means they deemed best and most appropriate.

This was the path of independent antislavery thought that Oberlinites had been blazing almost since the community’s founding. By the time the American Anti-Slavery Society schism, Ohio abolitionists were already some of the most independent in America. The *Philanthropist* boasted in 1838 that “Ohio abolitionists would feel themselves degraded by identifying the cause of anti-slavery with *names* or *institutions*; nor have they so far forgotten the respect due themselves, and their devotion to the *slave*, as to descend to personal squabbling, sectarian conflict, or humiliating strifes for the mastery.” They did not “‘do’ anything ‘because Mr. Garrison, &c. do it,’” even though they continued to hold the editor of the *Liberator* in high esteem. Ohio abolitionists, the *Philanthropist* editor wrote, “‘are of age;’ they are in the habit of judging and acting *for themselves*, without any *reverential* reference

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<sup>16</sup> William Goodell, *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A History of the Great Struggle in Both Hemispheres; with a View of the Slavery Question in the United States* (New York, 1855), 560-561.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, 560-561.

for what the *Spectator*, or *Liberator*, or *Philanthropist* may choose to say...we are glad of it.”<sup>18</sup>

The degree of partisan infighting among Eastern abolitionists did not replicate itself beyond the Alleghenies. Thus activists there continued to seek a practical abolitionism relatively unrestrained by ideological limitations. As Oberlin abolitionists pointed out, they were determined to rise above the divisions distracting their “eastern brethren” since they and other Westerners were situated “too near the great evil of slavery, and have too much abolition work to do, to cease contending with the common foe, for the sake of turning our weapons upon each other.”<sup>19</sup> In the Northwest, the break initially only produced a general sense of disappointment over the inability of the Easterners to get along. The *Oberlin Evangelist* had long expressed its earnest hope that the national society could remain intact “till the last fetter is broken from the last slave.” Its editors believed that *any* agitation on behalf of abolition was of great value.<sup>20</sup> The only immediately negative impact, though considerable, of the national split in Ohio was to make it easier for nominally Whig or Democratic voters to decide not to follow Birney and his supporters into the new antislavery Liberty Party.<sup>21</sup>

#### **“NEVER HAS THERE BEEN A MORE FRIENDLY SCHISM”**

In Ohio, the debate over independent political action continued, yet there were few overt signs that the movement was in disarray. Over five hundred delegates arrived at the annual meeting of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society in June determined not

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<sup>18</sup> *Philanthropist*, March 9, 1838; *Liberator*, March 9, 1838.

<sup>19</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, June 23, 1841.

<sup>20</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, March 11, 1840.

<sup>21</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 1, 1840; *Philanthropist*, April 28, 1840; Theodore Clarke Smith, *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Northwest* (New York, 1897), 39; Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal*, 5.

to let ideological differences divide the Western movement in two.<sup>22</sup> Official news of the national split had arrived only two days before the convention, and Oberlin men led the way in attempting to avoid the fatally divisive quarrels that had divided the national society. The result was, as one observer noted, a “very happy” meeting. Those issues which were dividing Easterners seemed “happily laid aside” in Ohio. In response to a letter from Lewis Tappan regarding the schism, the O.A.S.S. withdrew from being an auxiliary to the American Anti-Slavery Society, yet “disclaim[ed] all intention of censuring the old organization.” Importantly, they also stopped short of approving the new organization, “or expressing any opinion on the merits of the controversy between them.” Oberlin Institute professor John Morgan argued at length in favor of the resolutions, and after “some of his best remarks” they were adopted without debate.<sup>23</sup> One delegate concluded his account of the convention by declaring that the abolitionists of Ohio were “united, zealous, unfaltering, determined never to relax in effort, till the last chain be broken, and the shout of the redeemed bondman tell that slavery has expired.”<sup>24</sup>

Nonetheless, in 1842, the Executive Committee of the newly “purified” American Anti-Slavery Society dispatched their general agent John Collins on a mission to reclaim the Ohio Society for the “Old Org.”<sup>25</sup> Eastern Garrisonians viewed the Ohio society’s decision not to affiliate itself with either warring factions more from the perspective of withdrawal from the parent society than as a declaration of ideological neutrality. Prominent Garrisonians believed that “Ohio is to the West what

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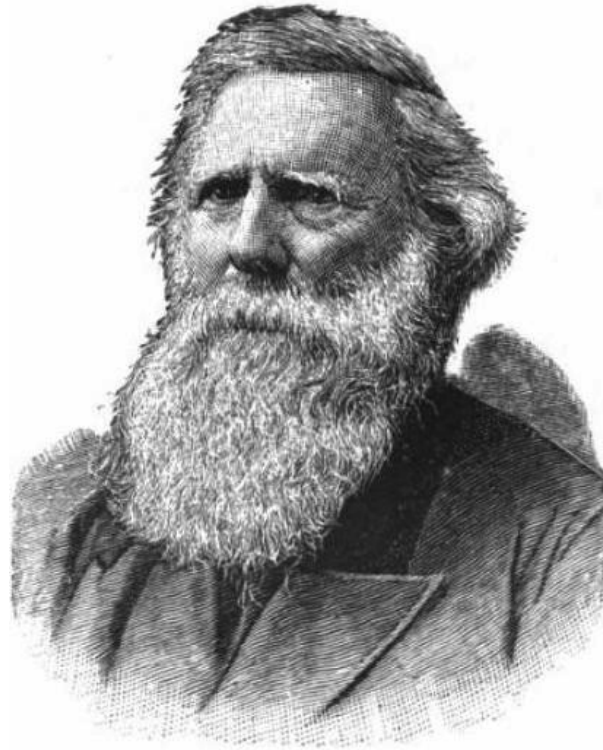
<sup>22</sup> *Emancipator*, June 11, 1840; J.R.S. to “Dear Brother,” May 29, 1840, in *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 1, 1840; *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 1, 1840; *Philanthropist*, June 9, 1840; *Emancipator*, June 18, 1840;

<sup>23</sup> J.R.S. to “Dear Brother,” May 29, 1840, in *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 1, 1840; *Philanthropist*, June 9, 1840.

<sup>24</sup> *Philanthropist*, June 9, 1840; See also *Liberator*, July 3, 1840.

<sup>25</sup> *Liberator*, June 24, 1842; *Philanthropist*, June 15, 1842; William Birney to James G. Birney, June 9, 1842, *Birney Letters*, II, 697-698. After the split, the A.A.S.S. was often referred to as the “old org,” to distinguish it from the rival American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, the “new org.”

Mass. is to N.E. in point of influence.” They decided that it was time that the blurred lines of allegiance be clearly redrawn between Western abolitionists.<sup>26</sup>



**Illustration 6.3: Professor John Morgan**  
(from Fairchild, *Oberlin: The Colony and the College* (1883))

Collins concentrated his efforts on playing up ideological differences between strict nonresistance and moral suasion on the one hand, and the pronounced shift of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society towards open support of the Liberty Party on the other. A minority of members were swayed by Collins’ “wily arguments and plausible sophistry,” as William Birney put it. Several joined together at the 1842 annual meeting in a motion to re-annex the O.A.S.S. to the American Anti-Slavery Society. When that measure was defeated handily, they withdrew from the state society to form

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<sup>26</sup> Abby Kelley, quoted in Dorothy Sterling, *Ahead of her Time: Abby Kelley and the Politics of Antislavery* (New York, 1991), 223; See also *Liberator*, November 12, 1847.

their own organization, the Ohio American Anti-Slavery Society, and renewed their auxiliary connection to the parent organization.<sup>27</sup>

However, John Collins did not remain long in Ohio. At the end of 1842, he traveled back to New England for a series of meetings on communitarianism and to resume his duties as agent for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>28</sup> In the absence of the divisive Eastern influence, the Ohio split remained relatively cordial. Representatives of the old society admitted that “certainly never has there been a more friendly schism since the separation of Abraham and Lott.” Gamaliel Bailey described the first Ohio Anti-Slavery Society anniversary meeting after the Garrisonian defection as “the best that was ever held in the state,” and their annual report stressed that only one point of difference distinguished the two organizations: “one is auxiliary to the American Anti-Slavery Society, the other is not auxiliary to any society.”<sup>29</sup> The two Ohio organizations informally agreed not to publicly discuss any differences which may arise between them, and reached an understanding whereby the points on which they did disagree would be “left nearly out of sight” so that they could “labor shoulder to shoulder, for the advancement of the anti-slavery cause” in pursuit of the measures upon which they could mutually agree.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the new society agreed to help pay off the old society’s debt, and the *Philanthropist* was to become the official newspaper of both antislavery organizations as well as the Ohio Liberty Party and the Ohio Ladies’ Educational Society.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> William Birney to James G. Birney, June 9, 1842, *The Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831-1857*, Vol.II, ed. Dwight L. DuMond (Gloucester, MA, 1966), 697-698. It should be noted that the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society was not one and the same with the Liberty Party. Each organization held conventions separate of one another to avoid the very conflicts of interest some Garrisonians accused them of. See *Philanthropist*, June 9, 1841, June 15, 1842.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas D. Hamm, *God’s Government Begun: The Society for Universal Inquiry and Reform, 1842-1846* (Bloomington, 1995), 77-80.

<sup>29</sup> Abram Brooke to Gamiel Bailey, December 19, 1842, in *Philanthropist*, July 5, 1843; *Philanthropist*, July 19, 1843.

<sup>30</sup> *Philanthropist*, January 4, 1843.

<sup>31</sup> *Philanthropist*, February 8, July 5, 1843; Stanley Harrold, *Gamaliel Bailey and Antislavery Union* (Kent, 1986), 44.

By the next year, the dual societies' meetings could still hardly be distinguished from each other. Members of each shared antislavery lecture platforms, and Liberty Party men, "toil-worn and slavery scarred champions of Freedom" such as Salmon P. Chase, Thomas Morris, Samuel Lewis, and Gamaliel Bailey were familiar faces and regular speakers alongside Garrisonian-leaning lecturers of the Ohio American society.<sup>32</sup> Conventions were called across the state with no mention of which of the two societies was the sponsor. In a great many, members of both groups cooperated in the gatherings. In the summer of 1844, the *Oberlin Evangelist* recommend that its readers attend a series of antislavery conventions, one nearly every night, to be addressed by Oberlin professor and "new org" adherent Timothy B. Hudson, Garrisonian and former Kentucky slave Henry Bibb, Ohio American Anti-Slavery Society agent and Liberty Party leader Samuel Brooke, Lane Rebel and Oberlin alum Amos Dresser, and others.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the fact that politics ostensibly contributed to the relatively painless split in the Ohio ranks, even the *Liberator* admitted that the issue was not nearly as divisive in the West as in the East. Its coverage of the 1842 anniversary of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society declared that "third party in that region is altogether a different thing from third party in New England."<sup>34</sup> A county meeting in the Ohio American's headquarters of Salem resolved in March, 1845 to do all in their power to reunite the two Ohio societies.<sup>35</sup> The Garrisonian auxiliary in Ohio even elected an avowed Liberty Party activist as its president as late as 1845. At the same convention, a

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<sup>32</sup> *Philanthropist*, July 5, August 9, 1843.

<sup>33</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 17, 1844; *The Cincinnati Philanthropist and Weekly Herald*, August 16, 1844.

<sup>34</sup> *Liberator*, June 24, 1842.

<sup>35</sup> *The Cincinnati Philanthropist and Weekly Herald*, August 16, 1845.

number of members attempted to recommit the group to its pre-1842 neutrality with regards to the national organizations.<sup>36</sup>

It was clear that the Ohio American Anti-Slavery Society was not organized simply as a Garrisonian bulwark against political action in Ohio. Like Garrison, they viewed exclusive allegiance to the third party as a misguided effort, but unlike strictly nonresistant Garrisonians, they still openly supported abolitionist politicians like Joshua Giddings, irrespective of party, when they stood for election.<sup>37</sup> The day that a portion of the Ohio Society defected in 1842, the president of the state's Liberty Party convention also joined them and donated a considerable sum to their cause. Their membership continued to include "warm Liberty party men" for the rest of that party's life.<sup>38</sup> To those who thought that there "ought to be a regular pitched battle between the Ohio American Society and the Liberty Party," Gamaliel Bailey declared, "there should be none, if I can help it...I would rather any time shake a friend by the hand, than knock him over the noddle."<sup>39</sup>

Despite the apparent friendliness among Ohio abolitionists after the national split, abolitionists from Oberlin undertook attempts to smooth over antislavery differences and allay the suspicions of many reformers that they would have to choose sides in the conflict or adopt an antislavery ideology of which they were not completely comfortable. In Ohio and elsewhere, most men and women who joined the abolitionist movement paid close attention to the important issues before the

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<sup>36</sup> Cyrus McNealy, after his election, tendered his resignation, "thinking that possibly his position was not understood by the meeting. He stated that he was a Liberty man, saw no inconsistency in an advocate of the Liberty Party acting as President of a Society which adopts the Constitution of the American Anti-Slavery Society as its platform, regarded the present position of the American Society on the subject of voting, as bearing precisely the same relation to the Constitution, that the position of the new organizationists on the subject of *not* voting did in 1839." The convention, all facts disclosed, immediately reelected him. *The Cincinnati Weekly Herald and Philanthropist*, July 2, 1845.

<sup>37</sup> See *Philanthropist*, June 15, November 12, 1842; (Utica) *Friend of Man*, June 29, 1841.

<sup>38</sup> *Liberator*, June 24, 1842; Abram Brooke to Gamaliel Bailey, December 19, 1842, in *Philanthropist*, July 5, 1843.

<sup>39</sup> Abram Brooke to Gamaliel Bailey, December 19, 1842, in *Philanthropist*, July 5, 1843.

reformers. Many went to antislavery conventions and read widely in the antislavery newspapers and literature available to them. Still, observers' comments suggest that few in the region felt the need to adhere to a rigid antislavery ideology. What was clear in the professions of rank and file abolitionists and the sentiments they expressed through their local antislavery societies was that slavery was a heinous wrong which required some solution. Few immediately bothered themselves with working out precise remedies. The statement of one Western Reserve man in 1844 is instructive:

Abolitionism is quite popular among us. Nearly every man is an abolitionist of some sort. We have modern abolitionists, old fashioned abolitionists, political abolitionists, and religious abolitionists, enthusiastic or hot-headed abolitionists, deliberate abolitionists, immediate and gradual abolitionists, ultra and radical abolitionists, subtle and Bondite abolitionists, and to cap the climax, we have quite a popular class of do-nothing abolitionists.<sup>40</sup>

Spokespeople from the Oberlin community stressed that being an abolitionist meant simply opposing the continuation of human slavery and doing whatever was within one's power to fight the institution. The means one chose were far less important than the desired end every true enemy of slavery shared. As Finney declared, "All the truly wise or truly pious have one and the same end in view," and the thoughtful consideration of this fact would then lead abolitionists to what they genuinely believed were the most appropriate methods. Both radicals and conservatives, Finney believed, misunderstood the true spirit of the reform, but those who held an "even tenor" sensibly understood that "'Wisdom is justified of all her children.'"<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> (Warren) *Liberty Herald*, May 29, 1844.

<sup>41</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, October 12, 1842.



Yet after the split, whenever abolitionists from Oberlin advocated principles which resembled the line laid down by the “new organizers,” Garrison pounced upon them without reserve in the pages of the *Liberator*. He and many other Eastern abolitionists would not countenance neutrality, and when members of the Oberlin community continued as the West’s most vocal advocates of independent, practical abolitionism, the town and all its residents became a favorite target of critical Garrisonians. Even though they had never sought out such a confrontation, Oberlin abolitionists now faced unrelenting opposition not only from enemies of abolitionism in their own region, but from the Eastern radicals as well.

William Lloyd Garrison’s greatest objections in the early 1840s were with statements emanating from the Oberlin community that espoused political action in support of the United States Constitution. His criticisms in numerous *Liberator* articles bore out Oberlin Professor John P. Cowles’ observation, even before the split, of radical Garrisonians in general that “If a man cannot swallow Garrison whole, hook and all, they give him over to Satan forthwith, that he may learn not to blaspheme the name in which they rejoice.”<sup>42</sup> Finney and his followers’ development of the notion of a religious duty to vote and support human governments was not flippantly meant to be a provocative jab at nonresistants, but was rather the result of careful study and protracted consideration. However, Garrison, under headings such as “Protestant Popery,” declared to his *Liberator* readers that he was becoming “more and more puzzled to determine the nature and character of Oberlin theology.” Mahan and Finney, he said, were utterly lacking of “moral courage and firmness.”<sup>43</sup> By even recognizing the authority of the President of the United States (who was a slaveholder), Oberlin faced Garrison’s cynical dismissal of their “*anti-slavery piety*.”

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<sup>42</sup> John P. Cowles to Henry Cowles, February 6, 1838, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 18, OCA.

<sup>43</sup> *Liberator*, September 17, 1841, August 26, 1842.

Finney, he imagined, felt “delight” to see a “man-thief...in the Presidential chair.”<sup>44</sup> In another column, Garrison derided Finney’s arguments that human government was a divine institution and described such reasoning as “Spectres of logic, and legal apparitions...sophistry and metaphysical parade.”<sup>45</sup> The community’s continuing valuation of the Sabbath and Christian ritual, what Garrison called Oberlin’s “iron bedstead of religious tyranny,” also came in for regular attacks in his paper’s pages.<sup>46</sup>

Still, Oberlin remained above ideological quarrels, and refused to fight a war of words with an editor seemingly bent on invective and censure. Finney articulated the widespread belief that whenever anyone, regardless of how much truth they had on their side, possessed a “wrong spirit in the proclamation and defense of it,” they could expect God to “give them up to defeat.” “The needed reformation,” he wrote, “can never be brought about by contending for truth in a wrong spirit.”<sup>47</sup> Oberlin professor and proud Garrisonian Amasa Walker gently reproved Garrison’s attacks upon his school, writing to him that “I know you would not wish to excite any unjust prejudice against Oberlin. It is a place where, above all others I ever saw, the colored man enjoys his rights.” “I trust you must feel friendly to Oberlin,” he remarked, “and be very unwilling to do any thing that should operate to its injury in the public mind.”<sup>48</sup> Others simply left matters to God; “Oberlin will live while truth lives,” one resident wrote directly to Garrison, “let its enemies say and do what they may.”<sup>49</sup>

Eastern Garrisonians continued to worry about the direction that Oberlinites were leading Ohio’s movement. Abolitionists like Quaker Lucretia Coffin Mott had long held a paranoid fear that the Oberlin community would “be New organized” and

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<sup>44</sup> *Liberator*, June 11, 1841.

<sup>45</sup> *Liberator*, September 17, October 29, 1841.

<sup>46</sup> See *Western Reserve Cabinet*, n.d., in *Liberator*, September 16, 1842, *Liberator*, June 11, July 23, 1841, August 12, 1842.

<sup>47</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, June 9, 1841.

<sup>48</sup> Amasa Walker to William Lloyd Garrison, July 30, 1842, in *Liberator*, August 12, 1842.

<sup>49</sup> P.D. Hathaway to William Lloyd Garrison, July 2, 1841, in *Liberator*, July 16, 1841.

take all of Ohio with it.<sup>50</sup> Others still believed that they should do all they could to wrest Ohio abolitionists from the grasps of “the pro-slavery priest and the aspiring demagogue,” their dismissive description of most non-Garrisonian abolitionists.<sup>51</sup> In 1844, under pressure from the Eastern radicals, the Ohio American society began to purge its Executive Committee of members who might slow the society’s move towards strict Garrisonianism, dismissing Samuel Brooke as its general agent. Brooke was also concurrently serving as a financial agent for the Liberty Party, and it was believed that he could not serve “with such divided loyalty.”<sup>52</sup>

Most prominent in the overhaul was the Executive Committee’s invitation to the radical Abby Kelley, the woman one historian terms “the flying wedge of Garrisonian policy,” to address their anniversary meeting in 1845.<sup>53</sup> Just a handful of months earlier, Kelley had informed one Ohio correspondent that the A.A.S.S. was “making arrangements to cut out the tongue of the Son of the Father of Lies, *New Organization*, alias, Third Party, in this state,” and it seems as if her mission to the anniversary was just so calculated.<sup>54</sup> Though she could not carry the convention to adopt Garrison’s declaration that the Constitution was “a covenant with death and an agreement with hell” or a stinging rebuke of the organized church, the delegates did give support to the motto of “no union with slaveholders.” Also, over the strenuous protest of Oberlin’s John Keep and others, Kelley helped pass through a series of

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<sup>50</sup> Lucretia Coffin Mott to Richard D. Webb and Hannah Webb, April 2, 1841, in *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott*, ed. Beverly Wilson Palmer (Urbana, 2002), 91-94

<sup>51</sup> *Liberator*, November 21, 1845; See also Douglas Andrew Gamble, “The Western Anti-Slavery Society: Garrisonian Abolitionism in Ohio,” Masters Thesis, Ohio State University (1970), 10.

<sup>52</sup> Brooke would change his renounce his politics in 1846 and be re-appointed general agent of the newly-named Western Anti-Slavery Society. See *Fourteenth Annual Report Presented to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, by its Board of managers, January 29, 1846* (Boston, 1846), 55; Gamble, “The Western Anti-Slavery Society,” 10.

<sup>53</sup> Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery, 1830-1860* (New York, 1960), 129, quoted in Richard E. Greene, “Abby Kelley Foster: A Feminist Voice Reconsidered,” in *Multiculturalism: Roots and Realities*, ed. C. James Trotman (Bloomington, 2002), 174.

<sup>54</sup> Abby Kelley to James Monroe, October 2, 1843, RG 30/22, James Monroe Papers, Box 1, OCA; *Salem Village Register*, *New Lisbon Western Palladium*, *Ohio Patriot*, n.d., in *Liberator*, June 27, 1845.

resolutions that finally and unmistakably distanced the Ohio American society from any connection with political abolitionism.<sup>55</sup> Along with her soon to be husband Stephen Foster and New Englanders Giles Stebbins, Benjamin Jones, Elizabeth Hitchcock, and Parker Pillsbury, Kelley helped establish the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* as the sole newspaper of the Ohio American Anti-Slavery Society in Salem, Ohio.<sup>56</sup> Its lead article in the first issue was written by the famous nonresistant and Hopedale community founder Adin Ballou and titled “The Superiority of Moral Over Political Power.”<sup>57</sup> As an exclamation point, the Executive Committee changed the name of the organization to the Western Anti-Slavery Society, to demonstrate that “all parts of the country, west of the Alleghenies...could be reached by the agents of the American Anti-Slavery Society.”<sup>58</sup>

Although the attempts of Oberlin abolitionists to avoid a practical division in Ohio were severely tested when the Ohio American Anti-Slavery Society remade itself as the Western Anti-Slavery Society, their continuing influence within that body kept it from ever becoming an exact mirror image of the American Anti-Slavery Society or Abby Kelley’s unrestricted radical domain. The year after the organization of the Western society, Oberlin alumna Betsey Mix Cowles, herself a close confidant of Kelley, issued a call in the *Bugle* for an independent abolitionist meeting, and invited “All friends of the slave ‘*of every persuasion*’...come-outer and come-inner” to gather together to work toward their shared goals. To those critics “who think every movement of the professed friend of the slave, only rivets his chains, come, that you

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<sup>55</sup> *Salem Village Register*, *New Lisbon Western Palladium*, *Ohio Patriot*, n.d., in *Liberator*, June 27, 1845.

<sup>56</sup> *Liberator*, July 11, 1845.

<sup>57</sup> Gamble, “The Western Anti-Slavery Society,” 50; On Ballou and Hopedale, see Aiden Ballou, *The Hopedale Community: From its Emergence to its Virtual Submergence in the Hopedale Parish* (Lowell, 1897).

<sup>58</sup> Parker Pillsbury to William Lloyd Garrison, June 22, 1846, in *Liberator*, July 3, 1846; *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, n.d., in *Liberator*, July 17, 1846.

may be confirmed—Those who blush for woman, that she is thus out of her sphere, come and see how she looks, that you may blush the more...Those whose superior wisdom looks upon us with contempt, come and see our folly.” Moreover, Cowles



**Illustration 6.4: Betsey Mix Cowles**  
(from Howe, *Historical Collections of Ohio* (1898))

appealed to *all* potential critics—“Those who call us Abby Kelleyites...come and see what a company of such ‘ites’ will do; only think of it, if one creates such a stir in community—what will a whole company do!” To Garrisonians, she urged “take your shield in hand; carefully peep over or under it; see how such ‘oos’ look.” To political abolitionists, Cowles suggested they “buckle on the whole political armor; come and stand your ground manfully.”<sup>59</sup> Besides Cowles, other Ohioans with Garrisonian leanings no doubt agreed with Oberlin student and Garrisonian Lucy Stone in feeling

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<sup>59</sup> *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, September 4, 1846; Linda L. Geary, *Balanced in the Wind: A Biography of Betsey Mix Cowles* (Lewisburg, 1989), 59.

sorry whenever true friends disagreed, “for ‘Union is strength,’ and the poor slave suffers by disunion.”<sup>60</sup> Despite grumbling from the outside leadership of the new society, everyone was welcome at the Ohio table.

Eastern Garrisonians did not understand how members of their Ohio auxiliary could simultaneously support them, and the Liberty Party and political abolitionism all at once. Abby Kelley angrily informed Betsey Mix Cowles that “Liberty Party, with Father Keep at its head, is trying to appropriate to itself the entire fruits of our labors.” She hoped to use the issue of the Mexican War against the Liberty constitutionalists to “expose their pro-slavery and bring all the honest hearts out from among them.”<sup>61</sup> Yet John Keep and many other “honest hearts” were also familiar faces at meetings of the then-Ohio American Anti-Slavery Society. Giles B. Stebbins, one of Kelley’s lecturing partners in Ohio, wrote to Garrison of his surprise when Liberty men in the Western Reserve refused to waste time bickering. They “manifested a fairness and candor that would put to shame their brethren in the East.” Stebbins found “less blinding prejudice, than farther East, and of course more willingness to discuss fairly, and with a wish to arrive at the truth.”<sup>62</sup> This, of course, was the Oberlin way, and as one alumnus remarked many years later, their “recognition that means, as well as ends, has their place in morals” represented a purifying and equalizing force in their abolitionism.<sup>63</sup> Put simply, their quarrel was with slavery, not other reformers.

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<sup>60</sup> Lucy Stone to Francis Stone and Harriet Stone, February 15, 1846, RG 30/24, FP, Box 10, Folder 2, OCA.

<sup>61</sup> Abby Kelley to Betsey Mix Cowles, June 29, 1846, Betsey Mix Cowles papers (hereafter BMC), Kent State University Special Collections and Archives (hereafter Kent State).

<sup>62</sup> Giles B. Stebbins to William Lloyd Garrison, July 9, 1845, in *Liberator*, July 25, 1845. Garrison agreed that these Liberty men were “generally very candid, and incomparably more kind and friendly to us than those of their party at the East.” William Lloyd Garrison to Helen E. Garrison, August 20, 1847, *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison: No Union With Slaveholders 1841-1849*, Vol.III, ed. Walter M. Merrill (Cambridge, 1973), 514-517.

<sup>63</sup> Walter E.C. Wright, “Oberlin’s Contribution to Ethics,” in *The Biblioteca Sacra*, Vol.LVII (July, 1900), 438.

When those most opposed to political action bolted the Ohio Society, it merely duplicated the efforts of the older organization. Liberty Party meetings and the moral deliberations of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society conventions had always been kept strictly separate.<sup>64</sup> Most members of the antislavery society were also supporters of the antislavery party, but its leaders also recognized the motivational value of an uncompromising active moral society. It would remain independent of, yet inform the rationale behind the actions of those among them who chose to work for the eradication of slavery through the machinations of a political system which required a certain amount of give and take to function. When the Ohio American society assumed the leadership of the strictly moral aspect of the state movement, it left the old society, almost to a man, the exact duplicate of the state Liberty Party organization.<sup>65</sup>

Many of the abolitionists began, when possible, to maintain membership and attend the meetings of both organizations in addition to their continuing involvement with the Liberty Party.<sup>66</sup> Within two or three years after the 1842 split, the old Ohio Anti-Slavery Society had for all intents and purposes disintegrated.<sup>67</sup> The new organization paid off its final debts, its newspaper became a shared organ, and abolitionists of all stripes began to use the names Ohio American Anti-Slavery Society, the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society, and the Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society interchangeably to denote the surviving moral abolition organization in Ohio. Both

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<sup>64</sup> *Philanthropist*, June 15, 1842; *Liberator*, August 18, 1843.

<sup>65</sup> See (Utica) *Friend of Man*, June 29, 1841.

<sup>66</sup> *Philanthropist*, June 15, 1842; *New Lisbon Western Palladium*, n.d., in *Liberator*, June 27, 1845.

<sup>67</sup> See *The Cincinnati Philanthropist and Weekly Herald*, July 10, 1844. Without the Garrisonian influence, the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society gradually became more political until it was indistinguishable from the Liberty Party organization in the state.

the Liberty Party and the antislavery society continued to gain members, but their respective membership lists shared many of the same names.<sup>68</sup>

Perhaps this overlap is best shown in the example of the farewell convention held to honor Abby Kelley and Stephen Foster's Ohio lecturing tour in 1846. The meeting was held in Salem, the headquarters of the Western Anti-Slavery Society, and though organizers expected only a few curious people to turn out for the discussions, a huge crowd filled the meeting house to participate in the discussions and to hear the abolitionist views of the Fosters and other antislavery luminaries. However, it was not just Western Garrisonians who made up the assembly, but a wide variety of abolitionists who came simply to celebrate the absolute advance of antislavery sentiment in their state and to acknowledge two of the holy warriors who played important parts in it. Thus, it should not be surprising that the same meeting that Stephen Foster presented an address on "the pro-slavery character of the Constitution, and the sinfulness of those who stand in political connection with the slaveholders" was also treated to a speech by a Western Reserve man with Oberlin connections who described the Liberty Party as "the abolitionist's staff of accomplishment, and the ballot-box the means of salvation to the slave."<sup>69</sup>

### ***"WE ARE AS A PEOPLE, CHAINED TOGETHER"***

The ballot box was also the hoped-for salvation of the Ohio African American population. The African American residents of the Oberlin community, a demographic that had been steadily growing since 1835, were some of the most urgent abolitionists in the town. Lane Rebel James Bradley was not the forerunner of

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<sup>68</sup> See *Philanthropist*, June 14, 1842, August 9, September 13, 1843; *The Cincinnati Philanthropist and Weekly Herald*, July 10, 1844; *Liberty Press*, n.d., in *Liberator*, November 10, 1843; Gamble, "The Western Anti-Slavery Society," 1-7.

<sup>69</sup> *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, n.d., in *Liberator*, April 24, 1846.



“hundreds of negroes...flooding the school” as skeptics had predicted in 1834, yet the Black influences on the Oberlin community’s antislavery efforts were well beyond what their absolute numbers would suggest.<sup>70</sup> Led by Oberlin students like Charles and John Mercer Langston, George B. Vashon, William Howard Day, and John M. Brown, and townsmen such as Sabram Cox, John Watson, and John Ramsey, Oberlin African Americans advocated an ideological independence not unlike their white Oberlin associates. They were disillusioned by the partisan infighting among Eastern abolitionists, and like other African Americans in the North in the early 1840s, feared that the vital energies of American abolitionism were being wasted on internal strife rather than the rightful objectives of emancipation and equal rights.

Yet unlike white abolitionists who might lament wasted effort while attempting to fight slavery on an ideological plane, Oberlin’s Black abolitionists brought to the table a different picture of slavery and freedom, informed by their own experiences either as bondsmen or from the daily exposure to racist America.<sup>71</sup> Slavery was tangible to them, and as William Howard Day reminded his brethren, “It is more than a mere figure of speech to say, that we are as a people, chained together.” “We are one people,” he declared in an 1848 address, “one in general complexion, one in common degradation, one in popular estimation—As one rises, all must rise, and as one falls, all must fall.”<sup>72</sup> As such, Oberlin’s Black abolitionists valued their town and school’s commitment to practical abolitionism and concern for the ends which must be met rather than the means used to get them.

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<sup>70</sup> See Nathan P. Fletcher, “Critical Letters, #3,” n.d., RG 7/1/3, Office of the Treasurer, Box 4, OCA. According to the 1840 census, there were only 62 African American residents in all of Lorain County, compared to 18,385 whites. *Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and Statistics of the United States; As Obtained at the Department of State, From the Returns of the Sixth Census* (Washington, D.C., 1841), 13-14.

<sup>71</sup> *The Black Abolitionist Papers: The United States, 1830-1846*, Vol.III, ed. C. Peter Ripley (Chapel Hill, 1991), 24.

<sup>72</sup> *Report of the Proceedings of the Colored National Convention, Held at Cleveland, Ohio, on Wednesday, September 6, 1848* (Rochester, 1848), 18.

The first handful of Black activists in Oberlin formed the nucleus of an aggressive group who constantly kept the community at a brisk pace of reformist agitation. Indeed, they would eventually become the radical conscience of the Oberlin community that refused to allow its antislavery vanguard to rest. As “lovers of liberty and of our country,” they resolved to use the benefits they gained from their Oberlin educational experience on behalf of the “oppressed colored citizens of the United States,” of which they were but “a portion.”<sup>73</sup> William Howard Day urged all similarly situated African Americans that with “our feet on the rock of freedom, we must drag our brethren from the slimy depths of slavery, ignorance, and ruin.” “Every one of us,” he wrote, “should be ashamed to consider himself free, while his brother is a slave. The wrongs of our brethren should be our constant theme.”<sup>74</sup> As an 1846 Oberlin African American meeting resolved, those who would be free, “themselves must strike the blow.”<sup>75</sup>

That African American students were so scarce in Oberlin’s early years actually amplified their sense of racial responsibility.<sup>76</sup> One female graduate remembered that each and every one of her actions at Oberlin College was charged with a significance far beyond its immediate consequence. She recalled that she felt as though she had “the honor of the whole African race” upon her shoulders during her class recitations.<sup>77</sup> As William and Aimee Lee Cheek suggest, the presence of the uncommon Oberlin African American student was akin to that of the fugitive slave on

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<sup>73</sup> *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, July 24, 1846; *Palladium of Liberty*, July 10, 1844.

<sup>74</sup> *Report of the Proceedings of the Colored National Convention, Held at Cleveland, Ohio, on Wednesday, September 6, 1848* (Rochester, 1848), 18.

<sup>75</sup> *Liberator*, July 10, 1846.

<sup>76</sup> Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 95.

<sup>77</sup> Fanny M. Jackson Coppin, *Reminiscences of School Life and Hints on Teaching* (Philadelphia, 1913), 12.

a lecture platform. Both were powerful agents for the abolitionist conversions of the white population that surrounded them.<sup>78</sup>

Oberlin African Americans were instrumental in organizing the town's "single most important" annual celebration.<sup>79</sup> Unlike most of America, it was not the Fourth of July. Since at least 1837, many Oberlinites had marked the Fourth as a "cruel mockery" of American freedom by using the occasion to lead antislavery meetings in Oberlin and nearby towns.<sup>80</sup> Others remained in their own community and went about their workdays as usual, with the important exception that on Independence Day, their income from their trades would be devoted entirely to "the cause of emancipation."<sup>81</sup>

Instead, Oberlinites celebrated the First of August in commemoration of the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies in 1834. The *Oberlin Evangelist* called West Indian Independence Day "a more interesting time to the friend of human rights, than the anniversary of American Independence, so long as the principles of the declaration of that independence are so utterly disregarded by our slave holding and pro-slavery citizens."<sup>82</sup> Oberlin alumnus George Clark summed up the feelings of many abolitionists in his song "Fourth of July":

This day doth music rare  
Swell through our nation's bound,  
But Afric's wailing mingles there,  
And Heaven doth hear the sound.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 95; See also Delazon Smith, *A History of Oberlin, or, New Lights of the West* (Cleveland, 1837), 56-58.

<sup>79</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 16, 1843; Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 109.

<sup>80</sup> *Philanthropist*, July 2, 1839; Nancy Prudden to George Prudden, July 4, 1837, Prudden family papers, RG 30/205, Box 1, OCA; *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 17, 1839; See also *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 14, 28, 1844.

<sup>81</sup> *Philanthropist*, July 2, 1839.

<sup>82</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 17, 1842.

<sup>83</sup> George W. Clark, *The Liberty Minstrel* (New York, 1845), 88-89.

Oberlin's first annual commemoration of West Indian Independence in 1842 consisted of a morning concert of prayer for the enslaved, and then a large public celebration later that afternoon. The master of ceremonies was an Oberlin man "whose face [was] as black as a slave holder's heart." President Asa Mahan, former slaveholder James A. Thome, the self-emancipated William P. Newman, Pittsburgh-born African American sophomore George B. Vashon, and Professor John Morgan were among the speakers who praised the wisdom of the British emancipators and scolded the lethargy of their would-be American counterparts.<sup>84</sup> It is also likely that music played as important a role in this initial August First celebration as it would in future observances, with participants joining together to sing songs like "The Negro's Appeal," "Brothers be Brave for the Pining Slave," "Am I Not a Man and Brother?," or some song from one of George Clark's many popular antislavery songbooks.<sup>85</sup> After the conclusion of the day's events, Oberlin's African American residents provided the participants, two hundred and fifty people in all, with a free celebratory banquet.<sup>86</sup>

### ***"COME OUT-ISM AND COME OUTERS"***

It was largely through the efforts of Oberlin African Americans and a handful of radical women that the faculty were moved to welcome Abby Kelley and soon-to-be husband Stephen S. Foster, the "come-outerism twins," to debate their theories in the Oberlin church.<sup>87</sup> Kelley and Foster were perhaps the most notorious of the

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<sup>84</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 17, 1842.

<sup>85</sup> See "Program of August First Celebration, 1846," RG 21, Box 2, OCA; *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 16, 1843; "Affectionate Mother" to Laura Willard, August 14, 1844, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 6, OCA; Geraldine Hopkins, "A Rare Abolitionist Document," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol.18, No.1 (June, 1931), 60-64.

<sup>86</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 17, 1842; *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 16, 1843.

<sup>87</sup> *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, October 9, 1846; Abby Kelley and Stephen Foster to Parker Pillsbury, n.d., in *Liberator*, October 23, 1846.

Garrisonians who strictly followed the biblical injunction “Come out of her, my people, that ye partake not of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.”<sup>88</sup> They viewed the Church as the great “bulwark of slavery” which “had been the most corrupt body of men in all ages, and always supported slavery.”<sup>89</sup>



*A. K. Foster*

**Illustration 6.5: Abby Kelley Foster  
(from Holley, *A Life for Liberty* (1879))**

Although some Northern churches condemned slaveholding as a sin, their counterparts in the South just as often acknowledged it as a benign and moral institution. However, membership within a national church body required a significant degree of compromise between these two positions, and in essence, even if one were a Presbyterian in the North who held antislavery sentiments, he or she was at the same time a member of an organization that in some way approved of slavery.

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<sup>88</sup> Revelation 16:4, quoted in Parker Pillsbury, *Acts of the Anti-Slavery Apostles* Boston, 1884), 366.

<sup>89</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, June 10, 1846.

Come-outers demanded that these churchgoers withdraw from all fellowship with these organizations if they refused to sever all connections with slaveholders or churches which sanctioned them. Moreover, come-outers scolded the clergy for standing in positions of authority that placed them between a parishioner and God. Those ministers who also served a church that countenanced slaveholding, to any degree, were especially odious in the come-outers' opinions.

They applied this same logic to the United States government and argued that for one to support a government that was not a pronounced enemy of slavery was no different than the outright support of a proslavery authority. Although the words "slave" or "slavery" did not appear in the United States Constitution, come-outers interpreted it as a proslavery document. Its clause that allowed 3/5 of "all other persons" besides free men in a state to be counted towards Congressional representation, the document's articles governing fugitives from labor, and its authorization of the use of federal troops to "suppress insurrections" (presumably slave rebellions in the South) damned the nation's foundational document in their eyes. Come-outers also took Southern politicians at their word when they declared that federal protection of their "peculiar institution" was an important part of the sectional compromise on which the national compact was based. This placed the Constitution in opposition to God's moral law. Garrisonian come-outers like Kelley and Foster instructed their listeners to immediately come out of "corrupt" churches, renounce the authority of clergy and constitutionally elected officials, and to do all in their power to accomplish the Garrisonian motto, "No Union with Slaveholders."<sup>90</sup>

Despite the respect Oberlin abolitionists held for governmental authority and their manifest reverence for organized churches, they recognized the kernel of truth within the come-outer argument. Professor James Thome admitted that no reform

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<sup>90</sup> See *Liberator*, May 20, 27, June 3, 1842.

ever set out with higher pretensions. He wrote that “Its lofty heroism, its uncompromising positions, its double portion of the martyr spirit, its parade of logical withal, and its specious eloquence” made it an attractive method of reform to some. Yet he also pointed out that “all is not gold that glitters. It is not the mill that clatters most that grinds the best grist.”<sup>91</sup> The Oberlin community itself practiced a form of religious come-outerism. Its only church steadfastly refused communion and fellowship to slaveholders, all the while remaining congregational in governance. Yet when the institute’s graduates went forth to preach in other churches which may have had some distant connection to a slaveholding congregation or congregant, they did so hoping to reform these church bodies from within rather than choke the life from them by withdrawal.

To Oberlinites, the role of the churches was not merely to be an abolitionist tool. Though the antislavery crusade was most decidedly a religious one, and though they believed that the churches must lead the way, abolition was not their sole function. This was the same creed that Charles Grandison Finney espoused before Oberlin’s founding—the eradication of slavery was an important, though not controlling, factor in complete Christian regeneration.<sup>92</sup> Thus, a church that did exert its influence in a sinful way should be condemned, but Thome wrote that “this is a case which calls not for proscription, extermination and destruction, but for patience, kindness, forbearance and instruction.”<sup>93</sup> By abandoning a potentially reformable church over a single issue, come-outerism came dangerously close to fabricating a

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<sup>91</sup> James A. Thome, “Come-outism and Come-outers,” *Oberlin Quarterly Review*, Vol.2 (November, 1846), 158-159.

<sup>92</sup> This was a major difference between Finney’s notion of perfectionism and that of many other perfectionists, some of whom he had converted but eventually went beyond his teachings. Though many Finney converts became abolitionists, it was the result of his teachings on perfectionism rather than from any specific instruction by Finney for them to become narrowly-defined abolitionists.

<sup>93</sup> Thome, “Come-outism and Come-outers,” 173.

religion of its own, a Christianity which was “to all intents and purposes devotion to the slave.”<sup>94</sup>

Thome wrote that “In imitation of Bible Christianity” radical come-outerism had two commandments. The first of which was that “thou shalt love the slave with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy strength.” Secondly, “thou shalt hate the slaveholder with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy strength.” Slavery seemed the only sin worth acknowledging, Thome complained, one that existed everywhere and defined all communities by their connection to it, “*excepting those that go the full length of disunion and come-outism.*” This, in turn, branded all members of national churches or ministers of the gospel worse sinners than actual slaveholders, the “corollary from the position that the Churches in the free states are the bulwark of slavery.”<sup>95</sup>

Thome then examined the logic of the connections come-outers drew between responsibility for slavery and Northern membership in particular organizations. National ecclesiastical bodies, that is, those with active congregations in slaveholding states who did not expel their slaveholding members, were condemned as pro-slavery. Every local church connected to those bodies was, by virtue of that connection, pro-slavery as well. Ministers who retained their affiliations with these national bodies, even if they were known abolitionists who used their pulpits to battle slavery and criticize their denomination, were pronounced pro-slavery “and branded as a slave holder of the worst grade.” Churches that, though they be removed from denominational contamination, gave or received letters from less enlightened

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<sup>94</sup> Thome, “Come-outism and Come-outers,” 163; See also *Oberlin Evangelist*, March 4, 1846.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*



churches, were condemned, as were those who admitted into their membership those Whigs or Democrats who were connected to the compromised governmental system.<sup>96</sup>

Oberlin abolitionists and many of like mind did not deny that slavery was a sin, and a great one at that. Indeed, they agreed that slavery was “the sum of all villainies.” Yet they could not grant that it was the *only* sin worth illuminating, or that everyone but the most estranged come-outer shared equally with Southern planters and slave-dealers the guilt for the survival of slavery in the United States.<sup>97</sup> Thome asserted that Oberlinites had the clarity to appreciate that there might be a significant number of anti-slavery people in the non-slaveholding states who might also exert “a vast and most salutary influence.”

Moreover, Thome further believed that their numbers and influence were rapidly increasing, and that their “incessant blows, both political and moral, are telling prodigiously upon the battlements of oppression.” He compared the come-outers’ method of wholesale dismissal to the “threshing machines which do most rapid execution, and in a most tearing way, but at an enormous waste of the precious grain.”<sup>98</sup> Even assuming for argument’s sake that the denominational churches of the free states were bulwarks of slavery, Thome recognized that it was only because they wielded an immensely powerful influence that should be appropriated rather than alienated. He asked if the slave would truly thank come-outers “for destroying a mighty engine of influence when they might by pursuing a different course have secured it entirely to his interest?”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Thome, “Come-outism and Come-outers,” 164-165; *Oberlin Evangelist*, March 4, 1846. Thome also included Liberty Party men in this category of come-outer disdain, even though he had “never heard the liberty man included in this particular connection.” However, “since he is uniformly condemned equally with the whig and the democrat as the enemy of the slave, we see not, why, in consistency, the same bull of excommunication should not be thundered against him.”

<sup>97</sup> Thome, “Come-outism and Come-outers,” 165-166.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*, 171.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, 174-175; See also Henry Cowles, “Abolition, a Religious Enterprise,” in *The Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine*, Vol.II (January, 1837), 138-139.

Abby Kelley and husband Stephen Foster were in the midst of their 1846 Ohio lecturing tour when they approached Oberlin. They had left a long trail of agitated audiences in their wake, as slavery, the Liberty Party, the United States Constitution, and the “New Org” came in for equal amounts of abuse.<sup>100</sup> Betsey Mix Cowles wrote Professor Henry Cowles before the Kelley-Fosters arrived in Oberlin. She admitted that “the tide of prejudice is strong against them,” but had faith that Oberlinites would allow them the opportunity to argue their case. “If they are propagating error” she said, “there is mind enough with you to grapple with it & free discussion is in accordance with the principles of us all.”<sup>101</sup>

However, when the Garrisonians arrived at the end of February, the Oberlin community was in the midst of a powerful religious awakening. “A revival, as usual,” Kelley Foster complained to a friend, “was in progress when we arrived.”<sup>102</sup> The *Oberlin Evangelist* reported that “this visit of our friends occurred at a time when many souls among us were anxiously inquiring the way of salvation, when many were just entering upon the peculiar trials, vicissitudes, and joys of a life of faith and consecration to God.” Many Oberlinites felt that they could not afford to have their minds or those of their children and friends diverted from the revival, even in favor of abolitionism.<sup>103</sup> Still, the couple was warmly greeted at the depot by Oberlin Institute student and former Garrisonian lecturer James Monroe, and welcomed into the home of President Asa Mahan.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> *Liberator*, May 8, 1846; See also Geary, *Balanced in the Wind*, 55-58.

<sup>101</sup> Betsey Mix Cowles to Henry Cowles, February 14, 1846, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 18, OCA.

<sup>102</sup> Abby Kelley to Betsey Mix Cowles, March 15, 1846, BMC, Kent State; See also Helen Cowles to Miss Hawkins, March 3, 1846, RG 30/27, Henry Cowles papers, Box 3, OCA.

<sup>103</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, March 4, April 1, 1846; Lewis Tappan to Charles Grandison Finney, March 31, 1846, Lewis Tappan papers, microfilm, Roll 3; Charles Grandison Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*, ed. Garth M. Rosell and Richard A.G. DuPuis (Grand Rapids, 1989), 469n12; Helen M. Cowles to A.Y. Hawkins, March 3, 1846, RG 30/24, FP, Box 5, Folder 3, OCA.

<sup>104</sup> Abby Kelley to Betsey Mix Cowles, March 15, 1846, BMC, Kent State.

Abby Kelley Foster spent much of her time in Oberlin attempting to illuminate their church's connection with slavery and endeavoring to show that the federal Constitution was a pro-slavery document which ought not be supported by voting or holding public office under its provisions. She recalled later that she believed she had made Oberlin's religious connection "with the vile system...considerably clear."<sup>105</sup> With regards to the Constitution, she argued that though its preamble expressed some of the egalitarian sentiment embodied in the Declaration of Independence, it must be dismissed as nothing more than "a signboard over a store door, which often tells untruths." The wisest solution to constitutional inconsistencies, she avowed, was to reconcile them through disunion and the complete separation of the North from the slaveholding South.<sup>106</sup>

One member of her Oberlin audience wrote that Kelley-Foster's rhetoric was far superior to her logic. Though many of her illustrations were poignant and her main argument was "perhaps as good as can be made in proof of such a position," she "failed to convince" her Oberlin listeners that they held the wrong views regarding their national compact. Oberlin thinkers admitted that though all parts of the constitution were not consistent with each other, its true spirit and intent could be inferred from its declared fundamental sentiments. Specific articles and sections were only "an expansion and practical application." Moreover, every man who voted under its provisions or swore to support it should still deem it his duty to seek its amendment "until all its details shall correspond with all its avowed principles and doctrines." Also, Oberlin's students of history could not help but recognize that the past had favored efforts to "improve existing forms of constitutional government rather than by dissolution and anarchy."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Abby Kelley to Betsey Mix Cowles, March 15, 1846, BMC, Kent State.

<sup>106</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, March 4, 1846.

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*

As Oberlinites saw it, one of the Garrisonians' chief argumentative flaws was their apparent lack of practical solutions to the problem of slavery. Timothy Hudson complained that "they tried to convince us how the work could not, rather than how it could, be accomplished." The Kelley-Fosters berated the organized churches and their members, disparaged Constitutional government, and criticized compromising politics, "yet failed to point out a more excellent way." "I for one," Hudson declared, "have yet to be convinced that the Liberty Party is not the heaven-appointed means for the overthrow of that most-vile & heaven-insulting system of slavery."

Most of Hudson's fellow townsmen agreed. They had no problem supporting the Liberty Party and its place in the American governmental system because they did not believe that the Constitution was necessarily a proslavery document. Rather, they subscribed to the constitutional arguments of abolitionists Lysander Spooner and William Goodell, who both famously argued that the Constitution was actually an antislavery document which could and should be used to abolitionists' advantage. They reasoned that only through a broad interpretation could disunionists interpret the document as supporting slavery. Strictly interpreted, there was no reference to "compromises," "guarantees," "slaves," "slavery," or "property in man." Instead, there was the clear guarantee to citizens of life, liberty, and property of the Fifth Amendment. Since slaves were either citizens or aliens (and if aliens they could be naturalized), they were ultimately entitled to the same rights as white Americans. Thus slavery was unconstitutional as were the various state laws that supported the institution.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Betsey Hudson to Betsey Mix Cowles, February 27, 1846, BMC, Kent State; Betsey Hudson and Timothy Hudson to Betsey Mix Cowles, March 5, 1846, BMC, Kent State; Geary, *Balanced in the Wind*, 54; See Lysander Spooner, *The Unconstitutionality of Slavery* (Boston, 1845); William Goodell, *Slavery and Anti-Slavery*, 563-582; William M. Wiecek, *The Sources of Antislavery Constitutionalism in America, 1760-1848* (Ithaca, 1977).

Overall, the impression that the Kelley-Fosters made upon Oberlin minds was similar to the opinion held by Hudson. Of Abby, he reasoned that she possessed a “powerful mind” and deep devotion to the slave. Moreover, her efforts in behalf of abolitionism were doing great good in the region. However, when moved to consider the logic of her argument, he could not admit that her positions were all sound or that she was at all times charitable, kind, or fair.<sup>109</sup> Helen Cowles, wife of Professor Henry Cowles, remarked on Kelley-Fosters’ look of “contempt and scorn upon her countenance” before she ever began to speak. Cowles wrote that the first address matched her appearance. “I left while she was speaking,” Cowles reported, “and though she spoke twice more, that was the last I wanted to hear from them.”<sup>110</sup>

For her part, Kelley-Foster was not generous in her impressions of the Oberlin community. In a letter to Betsey Mix Cowles, she expressed her opinion that “Bigotry there is as thick as the darkness of Egypt. You can cut it with a knife.” “Tis as I expected,” she wrote, and though she had hoped to be disappointed, she was not.<sup>111</sup> The debates of Mahan and John Morgan she characterized as “flimsy,” and when officials refused to indefinitely extend their debates alongside the ongoing revival, she exclaimed “in the language of the Church ‘Good Lord deliver me from the tyranny of superstition—‘tis the most cruel of all tyrannies.’”<sup>112</sup>

Garrison used Kelley-Foster’s account as another opportunity to disparage Oberlin, which had long been a favorite target of his journalistic barbs. Under the heading “Refuge of Oppression,” a column in *The Liberator* he specially reserved “to make permanent record of the various forms of hostility to the anti-slavery cause, its faithful advocates, and the free colored population,” Garrison excoriated the Kelley-

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<sup>109</sup> Betsey Hudson and Timothy Hudson to Betsey Mix Cowles, March 5, 1846, BMC, Kent State.

<sup>110</sup> Helen Cowles to Miss Hawkins, March 3, 1846, RG 30/27, Henry Cowles papers, Box 3, OCA.

<sup>111</sup> Abby Kelley to Betsey Mix Cowles, March 15, 1846, BMC, Kent State.

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*

Fosters' reception in Oberlin and the *Oberlin Evangelist's* explanation for it. He mocked Oberlin's "*pious*" pronouncements, even titling his critique "Piety Versus Humanity."<sup>113</sup> There, in the same column where he publicly rebuked the various proslavery Southern legislatures, colonizationists, actual slave dealers, and other proslavery forces, Garrison inexplicably wrote off the Oberlin community as no better than a den of slaveholders. By calling the *Oberlin Evangelist* a "refuge of oppression," he dismissed its messages just like he would countless other "tyrant's plea for grasping his victims."<sup>114</sup>

However, even Garrison's friends could not stomach this wholesale denunciation of one of abolitionism's most important strongholds. Massachusetts abolitionist Isaac Stearns fired off a letter to Garrison claiming that he could not see any harm in the *Oberlin Evangelist's* story, "unless the honor and rights of the slave, or anti-slavery, is paramount to the rights of God or his government...unless the salvation of the slaves from temporal and bodily bondage is of vast more importance than the eternal salvation of the souls of men to spiritual bondage, to sin and Satan." Stearns scolded Garrison, writing that "God is greater and more worthy of honor than all other beings put together." If God was in fact at Oberlin at the time "*manifesting* his presence...to have those of his sinful creatures who do not appreciate such things, come in to avert their attention to an inferior subject, I consider an indignity offered to God himself, and of baneful tendency."<sup>115</sup>

It seemed that no one was completely satisfied with the Garrisonians' February visit, and Abby Kelley-Foster soon began campaigning for another invitation later that year. Some members of the faculty, reflecting on the disruptive nature of the couple's first visit, suggested that Kelley and Foster were "unsafe advocates of the slave" for

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<sup>113</sup> *Liberator*, March 27, 1846.

<sup>114</sup> See J.T. Everett to William Lloyd Garrison, February 17, 1856, in *Liberator*, February 29, 1856.

<sup>115</sup> *Liberator*, April 17, 1846.

which it was “undesireable and unadviseable for them to come.” Kelley Foster complained to Oberlinite Lucy Stone that the decision was “all because we are infidels.” Instead, she believed that Oberlin’s community leaders would rather “attack us in our absence, and send the cry ‘Infidel’ on our heels, all over the country, but give us no opportunity to refute the vile slanders.” “I tell you, Lucy,” she went on, “these men know their position in Church and in State is the most corrupt and damning infidelity, and therefore they don’t dare to meet us before the people for an investigation.”<sup>116</sup>

Ultimately, the spirit of free discussion in Oberlin prevailed. A meeting of Black Oberlinites approved a resolution which declared that there was no way that the cause of antislavery reform could be so injured as by “distrusting the fidelity of the advocates of freedom.” They characterized the Kelley-Fosters as “true and honest friends of the oppressed,” and their ideological leader, William Lloyd Garrison, as the “Leonidas of the Anti-Slavery Movement.”<sup>117</sup> Oberlin officials finally agreed, and invited the two back, though they would have to present their arguments in the old chapel in Colonial Hall so that they might not “defile” the Oberlin’s First Church meeting house.<sup>118</sup>

The bulk of the several days’ discussion consisted of what Kelley-Foster described as a “brawling debate” between Stephen Foster and Asa Mahan, an adversary whom she called “very gentlemanly in deportment, but exhibit[ing] a recklessness of principle I was not prepared to witness.”<sup>119</sup> The men again took up the

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<sup>116</sup> Abby Kelley to Lucy Stone, August 15, 1846, RG 30/24, FP, Box 10, Folder 2, OCA; *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, October 9, 1846.

<sup>117</sup> *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, October 9, 1846.

<sup>118</sup> *Liberator*, October 23, 1846; Kerr, *Lucy Stone*, 39; Fletcher, 268. Kelley called the chapel “an old building always open for Whig meetings, and like pro-slavery caucuses.” *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, October 9, 1846.

<sup>119</sup> *Liberator*, October 23, 1846; *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 30, 1846; *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, October 9, 1846; Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul S. Boyer, *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary* (Cambridge, 1971), 648.

topics of the United States Constitution and come-outerism, and their debates were the biggest draw in town. The Oberlin Musical Association even interrupted their meetings “to accommodate the discussion then in progress...on disunion in church and state organizations.”<sup>120</sup> Mahan called come-outerism “a hideous monster” with numerous clawed arms, “each armed with hellish daggers.” Foster, for his part, questioned the sincerity of his Oberlin hosts and was unmovable in his positions.<sup>121</sup>

Lucy Stone concluded that some of the faculty were pleased with the lectures. The events “set the people to thinking,” so much that Stone imagined that “great good will result.”<sup>122</sup> The editor of the *Oberlin Evangelist* was not as convinced of a change of opinion in his town. “The discussion is now over,” he wrote, and “We are not aware that disunion and come-out-ism have made one new convert.” In fact, public opinion in Oberlin appeared to set more powerfully against come-outerism than it had before the Kelley-Fosters’ visit. The pair had been “weak in argument—strong only in vituperation.”<sup>123</sup> The editor wondered how they ever hoped to secure the respect of an intelligent community while pursuing such an adversarial course.<sup>124</sup> Charles Grandison Finney was even more negative in his assessment. Kelley-Foster wrote that “Professor Finney said the Spirit of God left the place immediately on our entering it.”<sup>125</sup>

In 1847, Western Anti-Slavery Society general agent Samuel Brooke led Garrison on his own lecture tour of Ohio, accompanied across the state by Frederick Douglass, Stephen Foster, and Oberlin Institute student George B. Vashon.<sup>126</sup> Abby

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<sup>120</sup> Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 269.

<sup>121</sup> *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, October 9, 1846.

<sup>122</sup> Alice Stone Blackwell, *Lucy Stone: Pioneer of Woman’s Rights* (Charlottesville, 2001), 63.

<sup>123</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 30, 1846.

<sup>124</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, June 10, 1846.

<sup>125</sup> Abby Kelley and Stephen Foster to Parker Pillsbury, n.d., in *Liberator*, October 23, 1846.

<sup>126</sup> See William Lloyd Garrison to Helen Garrison, August 16, 1847, in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, Vol.III, No Union With Slaveholders*, ed. Walter Merrill (Cambridge, 1974), 510-514.



Kelley-Foster had taken a temporary leave from lecturing for the birth of a daughter, Alla.<sup>127</sup> No abolitionist lecture circuit in the West was complete without a stop in Oberlin, yet Garrison predicted that he and his companions would make little headway there since they had only scheduled one day in town and “a good deal of prejudice is cherished against me on account of my ‘infidelity’ and ‘comeouterism.’” He maintained that they were nonetheless prepared, “to give our testimony, both in regard to the Church and State, whatever may be thought or said of us.”<sup>128</sup>

When Garrison arrived in Oberlin for the first time in August of 1847, he expressed a surprising “lively interest in its welfare.” “Oberlin,” he wrote to his wife, “has done much for the relief for the flying fugitives from the southern prison-house...It has also promoted the cause of emancipation in various ways, and its church refuses to be connected with any slaveholding or pro-slavery church by religious fellowship.” He thought that Oberlin’s political associations “diminish[ed] the power of their example,” but he held out hope that he could convince them of the error of their ways.<sup>129</sup>

Garrison, Douglass, Foster, James W. Walker, and Samuel Brooke arrived just in time to witness the Oberlin commencement. His most likely advocate among that year’s graduates, Lucy Stone, did not present a commencement address because, as a woman, she would not be allowed to read it publicly. However, the Eastern visitors did listen to platform speakers who denounced “the fanaticism of Come-outerism and

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<sup>127</sup> In 1846, Kelley had complained to Lucy Stone that her Oberlin listeners had attempted to assail her character by spreading the rumor that she was pregnant and immodestly continuing her lecture tour despite her condition. “*I am no more going to have a baby than you are,*” Kelley told Stone, “and as I have not heard you were, I take it for granted you are not, though should I *hear* such a report I would not believe it, if you were an anti-slavery lecturer. No, in Heaven’s name, I implore you to deny these malicious slanders. Do you believe we are wanting in ideas of decency, to say nothing of knowledge of physiology?...If I am not mistaken in physiological facts, I can never be a mother while I work so hard in this cause.” As Kelley’s biographer Dorothy Sterling notes, her knowledge of physiology must have been limited, because she was indeed with child. See Sterling, *Ahead of her Time*, 232.

<sup>128</sup> *Liberator*, September 10, 1847.

<sup>129</sup> William Lloyd Garrison to Helen E. Garrison, August 28, 1847, *Garrison Letters*, III, 522-526.

Disunionism,” while making “a thrust at those, who, in the guise of anti-slavery...are endeavoring to promote ‘infidelity’!” Finney, perhaps spying his guests in the audience, then took a turn at the rostrum and advised the graduates that “denouncing Come-outerism on the one hand, or talking about the importance of preserving harmony or union in the church, on the other, would avail them nothing.” He commended them to go “heartily” into all reforms of the age and, in language similar to Garrison’s, to be “anti-devil all over.” If they were not prepared to do this, Finney informed them that their future avocation should be anything but reform or the ministry.<sup>130</sup>

The next day, nearly three thousand people crowded into Oberlin’s First Church to hear the lively antislavery discussions. Garrison and Douglass did most of the talking for the Easterners, while Stephen Foster, curiously, said “but little.” Garrison described Asa Mahan’s defense of the Constitution as “perfectly respectful...with good temper and courtesy.” That evening, the group was entertained by Oberlin Institute treasurer Hamilton Hill and Professor Hudson. Though they could not afford the time to accept Mahan’s invitation to dine with him the next day, Garrison and his associates were able to spend time mingling with some of the students, many of whom made quite a favorable impression on the visitors.<sup>131</sup>

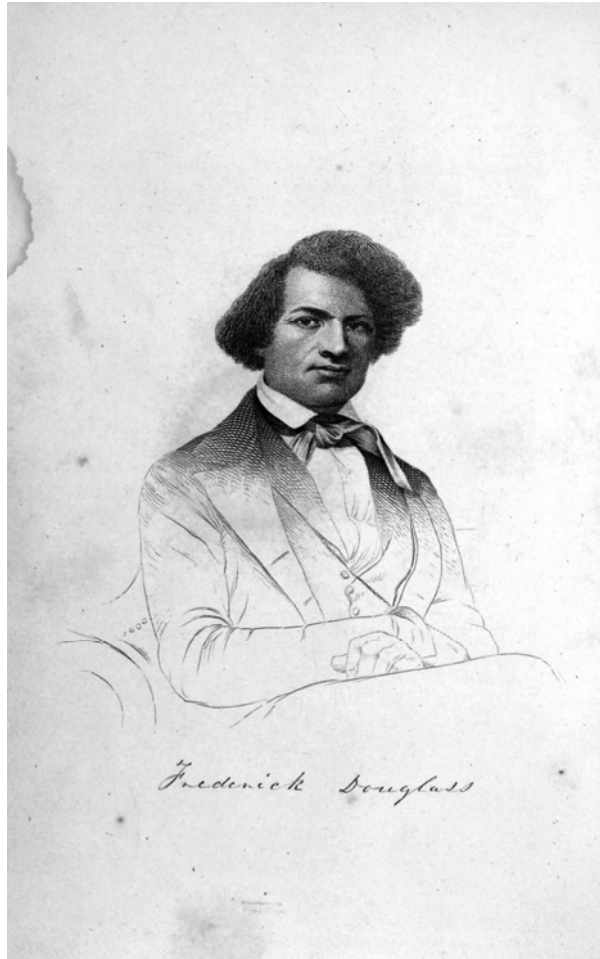
Many Oberlinites, if not won over by Garrison’s ideas, were thoroughly impressed by Garrison the man. For most of them, their only knowledge of him had been what they had read in the pages of the *Liberator*, and they were taken aback by the charming, polite gentleman and his associates they met that week in 1847. John Morgan, for one, finally understood the source of Garrison’s influence over his Eastern followers. He also heaped praise upon Frederick Douglass’ shoulders, calling

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<sup>130</sup> William Lloyd Garrison to Helen E. Garrison, August 28, 1847, *Garrison Letters*, III, 522-526.

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*; See also *Cleveland True Democrat*, September 3, 1847.

him “one of the greatest phenomena of the age...full of whit, human[ity] and pathos.”<sup>132</sup>



**Figure 6.6: Frederick Douglass  
(from Douglass, *Narrative* (1845))**

Still, Oberlinites lamented the fact that even such a powerful advocate for the slave as Douglass was constrained by the need to adhere to a particular abolitionist dogma in order to remain a member in good standing among his colleagues. Morgan noted that Douglass was “sometimes mighty in invective,” no doubt the result of his

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<sup>132</sup> John Morgan to Mark Hopkins, December 15, 1847, RG 21, Oberlin File, Inventory II, John Morgan Letters, OCA.

being too much “under the influence of the Garrisonian clique.”<sup>133</sup> The Oberlin community continued to believe that the antislavery movement was one of individuals who must each formulate his or her own personal ideology. After all, one’s own conscience was the ultimate arbiter in determining right and wrong, wise and foolish. The goal was emancipation; there were many legitimate paths to that end.

Though some radicals like the Kelley-Fosters continued to earn notoriety by their militant efforts to “out-Garrison Garrison” in their demands for dogmatic adherence to a strict ideology, even the *Liberator* editor increasingly became more receptive to the practical efforts of abolitionists of the Oberlin school and respectful of antislavery tactics other than his own, especially during and after his Ohio tour of 1847.<sup>134</sup> Though he continued to remind politically-minded reformers that there was a higher moral position to be obtained by them, Garrison hailed the political antislavery movement “as a cheering sign of the times.”<sup>135</sup> He believed that those abolitionists like the Oberlinites who eschewed conformity, did not “lose sight of the true issue,” and sincerely believed their chosen path to be the best hope for abolition deserved his earnest “commendation and sympathy.”<sup>136</sup>

Garrison’s lecturing partner Frederick Douglass emerged from that Ohio summer impressed and even more transformed than his mentor. He summed up his tour of Ohio’s Western Reserve by declaring the region “in a healthy state of Anti-Slavery agitation.” “The West,” he wrote, “is decidedly the best Anti-Slavery field in the country.—The people are more disposed to hear—less confined and narrow in

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<sup>133</sup> John Morgan to Mark Hopkins, December 15, 1847, RG 21, Oberlin File, Inventory II, John Morgan Letters, OCA.

<sup>134</sup> See J.T. Trowbridge, “My Own Story,” *The Atlantic Monthly* XCI, No.DXLV (March, 1903), 374; John L. Thomas, *The Liberator William Lloyd Garrison, a Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), 294.

<sup>135</sup> William Lloyd Garrison to Samuel J. May, Jr., in Garrison and Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison*, III: 236.

<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*; William Lloyd Garrison to Josiah Quincy, n.d., in *ibid.*, 235.

their views, and less circumscribed in their action by sectarian trammels, than are the people of the East.”<sup>137</sup> “Agreeing with or differing from you of the same religious faith or politics, or differing from you in both, it makes no difference,” Douglass remembered, “Once make him feel you are an honest man and you are welcomed with all the fullness of genuine hospitality, to his heart and his home.”<sup>138</sup>

Within weeks of concluding his Oberlin visit, Douglass publicly embraced the independence with which the Oberlinites had so thoroughly impressed him, distanced himself from the controlling Garrisonian influence (both ideologically and geographically), and established his own abolitionist newspaper in western New York.<sup>139</sup> In the first issue of the *North Star*, Douglass acknowledged the role of “that infallible teacher, experience” in convincing him to establish “a newspaper, devoted to the cause of Liberty, Humanity and Progress.” In his very first editorial, addressed to his “oppressed countrymen,” Douglass vowed not only to “boldly advocate emancipation,” but to do so unconstrained by dogma. “Among the multitude of plans proposed and opinions held, with reference to our cause and condition,” Douglass declared, “we shall try to have a mind of our own, harmonizing with all as far as we can, and differing from any and all where we must, but always discriminating between men and measures.”<sup>140</sup>

Douglass’ promise to “cordially approve every measure and effort calculated to advance [the] sacred cause, and strenuously oppose any which in our opinion may tend to retard its progress” earned the high praise of Oberlinites and the abolitionist editor of the *Oberlin Evangelist*, Professor Henry Cowles, who called the paper “an

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<sup>137</sup> *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, September 9, 1847.

<sup>138</sup> *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, September 23, 1847.

<sup>139</sup> See Frederick Douglass to Amy Post, October 28, 1847, excerpted in William McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 149.

<sup>140</sup> *North Star*, December 3, 1847; *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 27, 1848.

honor to the colored race.”<sup>141</sup> These men and women had advocated that same independence for years before Douglass ever gave his first public speech, even before the then-Frederick Bailey had escaped from slavery in Maryland. As antislavery reformers across the free states noticeably reconsolidated their efforts to achieve a practical abolitionism, the influential Oberlin community continued to be in the vanguard.

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<sup>141</sup> *North Star*, December 3, 1847; *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 27, 1848.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*“The tyrant’s grapple by our vote, We’ll loosen from our brother’s throat”<sup>1</sup>:*

### *Oberlin, Free Soil, and the Fight for Equal Rights*

As one of the principle issues that split the American Anti-Slavery Society apart in 1837-1840, the question of antislavery politics remained a primary point of contention among antislavery advocates later in the 1840s. Nonresistant critics of direct political action pointed to the gradual dilution of antislavery demands in the third party platforms for the sake of popular appeal. The compromises necessary to be a force in politics, they argued, destroyed the true moral essence of abolitionism. Even if successful in their objectives, strict moral suasionists worried that antislavery politicians would only superficially damage the institution of slavery while leaving intact the underlying racism that sustained it. For their part, abolitionists who hoped to effect emancipation primarily through politics valued any advance, however small, towards the eradication of slavery. They well realized that their political involvement dulled the radical edge that had originally inspired them to appeal to the electorate. Still, there were also those like the abolitionists from Oberlin who attempted to bridge the gap between politics and moralism, and these were often the reformers who achieved the most lasting and significant results.

Though these Oberlin abolitionists were directly involved in politics, they remained true to the principle tenet of the original Liberty Party platform and even the 1833 “Declaration of Sentiments” of the American Anti-Slavery Society. By bringing political as well as moral weapons into the fight with slavery, Oberlinites believed that they could at least check the growth of the institution. Further, by breaking the stranglehold of the Slave Power over the federal government, even in increments, they

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<sup>1</sup> George W. Clark, *The Liberty Minstrel* (New York, 1844), 154.

believed that they could direct slavery towards extinction. They also appreciated the degree to which politics could be successfully utilized towards the other significant aspect of their abolitionism: equal rights in the North. As other abolitionists quarreled over the appropriateness of moral suasion versus political antislavery, the Oberlin community embraced them both and employed them to the full advantage of African Americans, North and South, free and enslaved.

Their goals remained emancipation and equal rights. The means to those ends remained whatever strategy offered the best hope of success. An illustrative example of the Oberlin community's evolution may be found in the various editions of Oberlin alumnus George W. Clark's popular antislavery songbooks. From just a handful of tunes in the late 1830s, Clark's songbook went through seven editions entitled *The Liberty Minstrel* before being renamed *The Free Soil Minstrel* in 1848. The book's preface was constantly altered to reflect the transitions from Liberty Party to Free Soil allegiances (and later, Republican), but it always retained its moral core. Clark repeated verbatim in each edition the same universal declaration of intent: "An ardent love of humanity—a deep consciousness of the injustice of slavery—a heart full of sympathy for the oppressed, and a due appreciation for the blessings of freedom." Clark's melodies were songs with lyrics written by Garrisonians, "New Org" adherents, and even slaves, and were to be sung "wherever music is loved and appreciated—Slavery abhorred and Liberty held sacred."<sup>2</sup>

### ***"PERFECTLY PLAIN IN PRINCIPLE"***

As the Oberlin community continued to grow in influence in both the abolitionist movement and in local politics after 1840, the opposition they faced because of their abolitionism increased as well. Even in the face of harsh criticism

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<sup>2</sup> Jon Michael Spencer, *Protest & Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion* (Minneapolis, 1990), 43-45.



from within the abolitionist movement in the late 1830s and early 1840s, their stiffest censure came from the swelling numbers of their political enemies. When the Democratic majority in the Ohio legislature convened in the winter of 1841, one of its most pressing orders of business was the reception of petitions signed by hundreds of anti-abolitionists from different counties in the state whose primary goal was the extermination of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute.<sup>3</sup> A letter to the *Ohio Statesman* from Richland County gives some indication of the reasons the Oberlin community continued to trouble conservative Ohioans. The writer called the Oberlin Institute and its faculty and students the “great maelstrom of seditious faction, that is exerting a more potent influence in exciting sectional animosities...than any, I may say all, all other malcontent institutions in the U.S.” The writer considered their abolitionist activities “a matter of public notoriety—so notorious that almost every person in the State knows more or less about it.” The writer had “*no doubt* that the majority of them are *at heart* Traitors to the nation, and will prove themselves such...Hence their charter ought to be repealed.”<sup>4</sup> Even Ohio’s largest Whig newspaper called the persecution of the Oberlin community “but a fair return for the favors thus received,” referring to the fact that the town’s Free Soil votes had weakened the Whigs and helped the Democrats to the majority.<sup>5</sup>

Though the bill was taken up several times that session, final consideration was postponed until the beginning of the next.<sup>6</sup> When debate resumed in January of 1842, it seemed as if the recess had not lessened the animosity many lawmakers felt towards

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Earl to Asa Mahan, December 7, 1842, RG 30/24, Fletcher papers (hereafter FP), Box 14, Folder 1, Oberlin College archives, (hereafter OCA); See also Charles Grandison Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*, ed. Garth M. Rosell and Richard A.G. DuPuis (Grand Rapids, 1989), 387-388; *Journal of the Senate of the State of Ohio; Being the First Session of the Fortieth General Assembly, Held in the City of Columbus, and Commencing Monday, December 6, 1841* (Columbus, 1842), 358-359, 435.

<sup>4</sup> *Ohio Statesman*, February 9, 1842.

<sup>5</sup> *Ohio State Journal*, February 21, 1842.

<sup>6</sup> *Journal of the Senate... 1841*, 564-565.

all that Oberlin and the community stood for. Lorain County senator Josiah Harris wrote to his wife late in 1842, telling her that she could not possibly conceive “of the opposition and prejudice existing against Oberlin College in the Legislature.”<sup>7</sup> Opponents wasted little time before striking. On the very first day of the session, Knox County Representative Caleb McNulty introduced a bill to repeal Oberlin’s charter, a move Portage County Representative Thomas Earl told Asa Mahan was “introduced and sustained by the leaders of the Locofoco [Democratic] party in the house.”<sup>8</sup> In the rush to discredit everything connected with “Oberlin,” Democratic lawmakers called the town and its inhabitants “a nuisance and a disgrace to this state,” a “banditti of law breakers,” “a foul stench in their nostrils,” and “negro stealers supported by enemies of this country abroad, and emissaries at home.”<sup>9</sup>

Oberlin’s progressive Whig friends and Free Soilers offered some defense of the community. In the case of most Whigs, however, it was mainly to self-servingly counteract whatever abuse the Democrats offered. These lawmakers described the Democrats’ charges as “vague and indefinite—but violent and vindictive in their character.”<sup>10</sup> David Chambers of Muskingum County asked for proof of Oberlin’s infractions and a more precise definition of what Democratic lawmakers meant by “infamous.”<sup>11</sup> Hocking County’s Legrand Byington arose and boldly answered him “Why Sir, the evidence of the iniquitous character of that institution is as broad as the

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<sup>7</sup> Josiah Harris to Wife, Thanksgiving, A.M., 1842, in James H. Fairchild, *Oberlin: The Colony and the College*, “Appendix,” 368-370.

<sup>8</sup> *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Ohio; Being the First Session of the Forty First General Assembly, Held in the City of Columbus, and Commencing Monday, December 5, 1842* (Columbus, 1842), 7; Thomas Earl to Asa Mahan, December 7, 1842, RG 30/24, FP, Box 14, Folder 1, OCA; See also Finney, *Memoirs*, 387-388.

<sup>9</sup> *The Ohio Statesman*, December 13, 1842; *Cleveland Daily Herald*, December 12, 1842.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Earl to Asa Mahan, December 7, 1842, RG 30/24, FP, Box 14, Folder 1, OCA.

<sup>11</sup> *The Ohio Statesman*, December 13, 1842.

light of day; and those who control it, glory in their villainy.” “Such being the fact,” he argued, “it was folly to waste time” debating details.<sup>12</sup>

The bill initially seemed certain to pass the House.<sup>13</sup> It was referred to a standing Judiciary Committee, and on December 23 Byington reported that a majority of the committee recommended its passage without amendment.<sup>14</sup> The next day, McNulty reintroduced a copy of Delazon Smith’s *Oberlin Unmasked* to the body, and vouched for its accuracy with a document signed by ten residents of Brown County who testified to the “good standing and integrity” of the author.<sup>15</sup> However, when McNulty moved for a final vote, several key Democrats were absent, and the House was quickly adjourned. Later, he moved again for the final vote, but could not rally enough support to push the bill through. Thomas Earl was finally able to win indefinite postponement of the measure by a vote of thirty six to twenty nine.<sup>16</sup>

There would not be another attempt to rescind the Oberlin Institute’s charter. It is possible that some Democrats and otherwise-hostile Whigs may have actually been turned off by the ridiculous obstinacy of the Oberlin community’s most vocal opponents in the Ohio legislature like Caleb McNulty and Legrand Byington. More likely however, Oberlin’s friends were able to play down the idea of the “treasonable” menace in the minds of a significant number of their colleagues. The editors of the *Oberlin Evangelist* expressed their gratitude to Josiah Harris and Thomas Earl “for

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<sup>12</sup> (Iowa City) *Palimpsest*, Vol.II, No.8 (August, 1921), 243; *The Ohio Statesman*, December 13, 1842; Byington may have also held an specially great degree of hostility towards Oberlin since local Whig rallies had been prominently displaying a painting by Oberlin’s Alonso Pease which was described by one Democratic editor as “a representation of the devil with a ‘long tailed blue,’ ruffle-shirt, tight pants, &c. His tail projected out behind, and curled up with a barb upon it! Over head was written ‘Le Grand Byington.’” See (Elyria) *Independent Treasury*, October 5, 1842.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Earl to Asa Mahan, December 7, 1842, RG 30/24, FP, Box 14, Folder 1, OCA; Josiah Harris to Wife, Thanksgiving, A.M., 1842, in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 368-370.

<sup>14</sup> *Journal of the House of Representatives... 1842*, 136.

<sup>15</sup> *Ohio State Journal*, December 26, 1842.

<sup>16</sup> *Journal of the House of Representatives... 1842*, 227; *Ohio Statesman*, December 13, 1842; *New York Evangelist*, December 22, 1842.

their efforts, and to God for their success, in counteracting the violent and vindictive spirit which sought to condemn and execute the Institute.”<sup>17</sup>

One reason for the aggression of the Ohio political establishment was the Oberlin community’s increasing clout in state politics. Though their votes in the 1840 elections registered little impact in state elections, by 1842 Oberlin voters had combined into a solid voting bloc that greatly strengthened the Liberty Party in Ohio. In the governor’s race that year, Russia Township, of which Oberlin was the main part, gave Liberty candidate Leicester King a two hundred and forty percent advantage over his closest competitor, and King’s vote total was thirty five percent higher than the *combined* total of the Whig and Democratic candidates.<sup>18</sup> Over the next two years, with a single exception, Oberlin delivered a plurality of their votes to Liberty Party candidates, and it seems that only the fear of Texas annexation in 1844 could push a small number back into the Whig camp.<sup>19</sup>

Still, the primary political allegiance of most Oberlinites remained the interests of the enslaved and equal rights. The single exception where the majority of Oberlin voters did not support the Liberty Party ticket referred to above is instructive. In 1843, abolitionist Edward Hamlin of Elyria ran for Congress as a Whig. Russia Township helped him to victory by giving him a convincing majority of its votes.<sup>20</sup> The editor of the Warren *Liberty Herald* scolded Oberlin’s voters for throwing their support to the Whig candidate over the Liberty Party man. He named “President Mahan, Professors Finney and Whipple, and Mr. Taylor of the *Evangelist*...as among those who had assented to the anti-slavery pretensions of the whig party [sic.], and would yield them their support.” Hoping to lay a great insult upon them, he asked “On what

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<sup>17</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, January 18, 1843; See also *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 3, 1856.

<sup>18</sup> *Philanthropist*, December 7, 1842.

<sup>19</sup> Joel Tiffany to Gamaliel Bailey, November 2, 1844, in *The Cincinnati Weekly Herald and Philanthropist*, November 13, 1844.

<sup>20</sup> *Lorain Republican*, September 6, 13, 20, 27, 1843, October 11, 18, 25, 1843.

common ground have the Oberlin abolitionists and the Clay Whigs of Lorain been enabled to meet in loving embrace at the polls?”<sup>21</sup>

However, Hamlin’s pledge to the Oberlin voters had been to *oppose* the slaveholder Henry Clay’s nomination and election in the upcoming presidential campaign.<sup>22</sup> The editor of the *Oberlin Evangelist* defended his town’s course in the election by boldly declaring “We have not changed our action since 1840. We vote for the slave, and for the man, let him belong to what party he may, who will do his full duty to the slave.” Still, Oberlinites would always sustain the nominations of the Liberty party, unless someone else could foreseeably do more than the Liberty nominees. To *Oberlin Evangelist* editor Horace C. Taylor and the independent Oberlinites he spoke for, their path seemed “perfectly plain in principle. In just such circumstances we were placed at the late election.”<sup>23</sup>

### **“VENI, VIDI, VICI”**

In the year before the national elections of 1844, the Liberty Party was seemingly handed on a golden platter a valuable political issue. Unlike the major parties that ascribed vital importance to a litany of different issues in their platforms, the Liberty party initially limited itself to a single vital issue: slavery. All other political points could be subsumed within “slavery” or solved by its eradication. In offering candidates for office who prioritized the slavery issue, the Liberty Party believed that they simultaneously offered candidates whose values would inform all other important decisions in a consistent manner. A true friend of equal rights would always side with the best interests of the people. By not busying itself with fashioning

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<sup>21</sup> (Warren) *Liberty Herald*, October 26, November 9, 16, 1843; See also *The Cincinnati Weekly Herald and Philanthropist*, November 8, 1843.

<sup>22</sup> *The Cincinnati Weekly Herald and Philanthropist*, November 8, 1843.

<sup>23</sup> (Warren) *Liberty Herald*, November 9, 1843.

planks concerned with what they viewed as less consequential issues like the tariff or the bank, the Liberty Party believed that its unpledged politicians, from an equal rights perspective, would be best qualified to decide all other issues after discussion on the floor of Congress, utilizing the collective wisdom of its members.<sup>24</sup>

Predictably, the antislavery party had suffered from lack of appeal to a large constituency. They simply were unable to convince a critical mass of people that slavery and its extension were the most pressing issues facing them at election time. The issue of the national bank still registered strongly with many voters, and the tariff question was hotly debated across the nation. Though the institution of slavery did not positively appeal to many Northerners, neither did it seem to merit discussion alongside these other important issues, which also included public lands, internal improvements, and others.

The issue of Texas annexation had been lurking in the shadows of mainstream political discourse since the mid 1830s, and was increasing annually.<sup>25</sup> Southern slaveholders had been immigrating to Texas since the 1820s with the approval of Mexico. However, when Mexico decreed a plan of gradual emancipation, Anglo-American residents declared their independence. They fought a bloody war with Mexico and founded the Republic of Texas in 1835 hoping for a speedy annexation to the United States.<sup>26</sup> By the late 1830s, it seemed almost certain that Texas would come into the Union, potentially as four separate slave states.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See *Philanthropist*, June 16, 1841.

<sup>25</sup> See for example, “petitions praying that no new slave State may be admitted into the Union, and that all propositions for the annexation of Texas to this Union may be rejected,” in *Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States, Being the Third Session of the Twenty-Fifth Congress, Begun and Held at the City of Washington, December 3, 1838, and in the Sixty Third Year of the Independence of the United States* (Washington, 1839), 233.

<sup>26</sup> See T.R. Fehrenbach, *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans* (New York, 2000), 190-267; Frank W. Johnson, *A History of Texas and the Texans*, Vol.I (Chicago, 1914), 7-21, 51-147, 386-396, 456-490.

<sup>27</sup> Fehrenbach, *Lone Star*, 263-267.

Oberlin abolitionists, like many Americans, feared that they had been unwillingly swept into a new, more ominous era in the nation's history. "Annexation is now the greatest word in the American vocabulary," Oberlin student John W. Alvord declared in an antislavery speech. He warned that "*veni-vidi-vici* is inscribed on the banners of every Caesar who leads a straggling band of American adventurers into the chaparral of a territory which an unfortunate war has given them the right to invade."<sup>28</sup> Annexation was a probability, and the issue was one of the most urgent in the public mind. To many, America seemed to be moving towards an age of conquest and military adventurism at the whim of the Slave Power.

The South appeared united across party lines in favor of annexation, while the North was divided. Whigs opposed it; most Democrats favored it. Though Northern Democrats dismissed the Liberty Party threat as miniscule, Whigs realized the danger that they faced from mounting deserters to the Liberty standard over the issue. Moreover, when President William Henry Harrison died of pneumonia in April 1841 just a month after taking office, Whigs found themselves members of a party under the leadership of a man who did not accurately represent the majority of his followers. John Tyler of Virginia had been a longtime Jacksonian Democrat before his addition to the Harrison ticket in 1840. He was a proud slaveholder, an enemy of Henry Clay, and a strong states' rights advocate.<sup>29</sup> Within five months of his assumption of the presidency, all but one of Tyler's Whig cabinet members had resigned in disgust. By the end of the year, prominent party men were demanding that Tyler pledge not to

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<sup>28</sup> *Philanthropist*, March 30, 1840; See also *Philanthropist*, April 13, 1842.

<sup>29</sup> Harrison was born in Virginia, but had served in various political roles in the Northwest Territory, Indiana Territory, and Ohio before winning the presidency. He was also a slaveholder. When he decided to run for the presidency, he decided that it would be impolitic for him to have "bastard slave children." He gave away his slaves, several of which he had fathered by his slave mistresses, to his brother. Walter White, the Executive Secretary of the N.A.A.C.P. from 1931-1955, was Harrison's great grandson by his slave mistress Dilsia. See Kenneth Robert Janken, *Walter White: Mr. N.A.A.C.P.* (Chapel Hill, 2006), 3.

seek re-election.<sup>30</sup> Progressive Whigs began defecting to the Liberty Party in droves. Steadfast “Conscience” Whigs, though a small minority in their party, attacked the upstart independents, arguing that it was their position in a powerful national party that offered the only possible protection against Texas annexation and the resulting expansion of slavery.<sup>31</sup>

When the Democracy nominated the slaveholding Tennessean James K. Polk for the presidency in late 1843 and came out unequivocally for annexation, “Conscience” Whigs ratcheted up the force of their attacks. Most Whigs viewed the Liberty Party men as vote poachers who were actually helping the Democrats. The most progressive of them hoped abolitionists would not throw away their votes and hazard handing over the presidency to proslavery men who favored annexation. The Whigs’ own candidate Henry Clay had initially declared himself against annexation. Despite the incongruous fact that Clay was also a slaveholder, Whigs accused the Liberty Party of being the sinister tools of the proslavery Democracy.<sup>32</sup>

Lorain County Whigs implored Liberty Party men to “reflect before they cast a vote that will be equivalent to one vote for the loco-foco ticket.”<sup>33</sup> In an even more direct critique, another Lorain County Whig newspaper accused the Liberty Party of adopting a policy of “DIVIDE and RUIN.” The paper emphasized the role of several unnamed Oberlin Institute professors who had allegedly declared it the duty of all Liberty Party men to “do all the mischief [they] could to both the political parties.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See Thomas G. Mitchell, *Indian Fighters Turned American Politicians: From Military Service to Public Office* (Santa Barbara, 2003), 80; Edward P. Crapol, *John Tyler: The Accidental President* (Chapel Hill, 2006), 7-28.

<sup>31</sup> Antislavery Whigs who remained in the party such as Charles Sumner, John Quincy Adams, Henry Wilson, and Joshua Giddings became known as “Conscience Whigs,” as opposed to the conservative “Cotton Whigs” whose close links to the South either led them to de-emphasize the slavery issue or come out in favor of the institution. See Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago, 1984), 43-69.

<sup>32</sup> See *Huron Reflector*, October 29, 1844.

<sup>33</sup> (Elyria) *Independent Treasury*, October 5, 1842. See also (Elyria) *Independent Treasury*, June 22, 1842.

<sup>34</sup> *Ohio Atlas and Elyria Advertiser*, September 29, 1841.



Antislavery “Conscience” Whigs claimed that they wanted to see slavery go down to ruin just as much as the independent politicians. Even the Democratic press in Ohio admitted that the Liberty Party’s approach seemed suicidal to their own true interests. The Whigs, the editor of the *Lorain Republican* wrote, had always been the Liberty Party’s closest allies, and “*now stood ready and willing to co-operate with the abolitionists in their undertakings.*”<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, state election returns in October showed a marked increase in the Third Party vote over the previous election. Lorain County set the pace, producing the largest proportional Liberty Party vote of any county in Ohio. The *Cincinnati Philanthropist and Weekly Herald* declared “Well done Lorain!” and dubbed Oberlin’s home county “the banner county of the State.”<sup>36</sup>

At the national Liberty Party convention in Buffalo following the elections of 1843, James Birney and Thomas Morris were unanimously nominated to head the presidential ticket, and a series of resolutions were passed laying out the party’s bare bones platform and core beliefs. Curiously missing from these position statements was any mention of their stand on the Texas issue. As it became clear on the campaign trail that the proslavery interests were pushing for annexation and the Whigs were moving into a position of opposition, the attitude of the Liberty Party, in Ohio and elsewhere, remained ambiguous and confused as to how best to counter Whig strength. Members who had reluctantly left the Whig Party for the Liberty banner were particularly vexed. The unexpected and generally unappreciated appearance of Abby Kelley and Stephen Foster at the convention, seemingly bent on castigating any and all political positions, did not help in solidifying the Liberty Party approach.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Lorain Republican*, July 12, 1843; See also *Ohio Atlas and Elyria Advertiser*, August 26, 1842.

<sup>36</sup> *The Cincinnati Philanthropist and Weekly Herald*, October 23, 1844; See also Joel Tiffany to Gamaliel Bailey, November 2, 1844, in *The Cincinnati Philanthropist and Weekly Herald*, November 13, 1844.

<sup>37</sup> “Rough Notes of Anti-Slavery Meeting, Buffalo,” August 31, 1843, Oberlin File, RG 21, Series VI, Box 1, OCA; *Lorain Republican*, September 13, 1843; *Liberator*, September 15, 1843; See also Dorothy Sterling, *Ahead of Her Time: Abby Kelley and the Politics of Antislavery* (New York, 1991),

On the one hand, it seemed as if the only thing between an expanded slave South was an act of Congress and the signature of a Democratic president. There seemed to be something to the Whig argument that anything short of those Liberty Party members' support of the Whig candidate would result in a Democratic victory. To a point, the Whig logic was on target; realistically, they were the only hope against Democratic success and Texas annexation. Their fatal flaw was their selection of Henry Clay as their presidential candidate. Had they selected anyone remotely resembling a man with antislavery principles, the continued existence of the Liberty Party would have been seriously threatened.<sup>38</sup>

In Henry Clay, however, the Whigs had selected the man just duplicitous enough, in abolitionists' eyes, to be the most undesirable candidate possible. Clay was a slaveholder, an obvious disqualification for abolitionist support. Moreover, his public ridicule of abolitionists (presumably to court Southern favor) made his selection utterly repulsive to antislavery appetites. Admittedly, Clay had once spoken out against Texas annexation, but in his "Alabama letter" written in the summer of 1844 he enthusiastically declared that he would "be glad to see it [annexed], without dishonor...and upon just and fair terms."<sup>39</sup> In addition, Clay opposed the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia.<sup>40</sup>

Ohioans were unrelenting in their attacks on the Kentucky Senator. One of the few sympathetic *Philanthropist* readers objected to the paper's anti-Clay bias. "I think too much of *Henry Clay*," he wrote, "to longer support a paper that abuses him as

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179-180. One critic later remarked that "these Disunionists are the only class of people in the world, who hold it good manners to thrust themselves upon a Convention of men to whom they do not belong, to which they are not invited, and where they know they are not wanted." *Liberator*, March 5, 1847.

<sup>38</sup> Smith, *Liberty and Free Soil Parties*, 72.

<sup>39</sup> Henry Clay to Thomas M. Peters and John M. Jackson, July 27, 1844, in Henry Clay, *The Papers of Henry Clay*, Vol.X, ed. M.P. Hay (Lexington, 1991), 89-91.

<sup>40</sup> See Henry Clay, "Petitions for the Abolition of Slavery," in *The Life and Speeches of the Hon. Henry Clay*, Vol.II, ed. Daniel Mallory (New York, 1857), 355-375.

much as you do.”<sup>41</sup> In editor Gamaliel Bailey’s estimation, Clay had earned his ill-treatment by having done more to extend the domination of the Slave Power than anyone else, and was “the guardian angel in the interests of slavery.”<sup>42</sup> Asa Mahan excoriated Clay to Oberlin audiences by calling him “a most bloody duelist, and a man who sustains the vilest character.” On one occasion he criticized Clay to the point where one out of town observer characterized the Oberlin Institute president as more resembling “a street brawler” than a minister.<sup>43</sup> Professor Timothy Hudson undertook a lecture tour where, a Whig paper protested, he “abused the Whigs and Mr. Clay most shamefully...after the most approved Locofoco style.”<sup>44</sup> Another group of Oberlin clergymen passed on to their readership the insight that “*The blood of murder is on the hands of everyone who votes for a DUELIST.*” Moreover, they declared that “He who votes for a SLAVEHOLDER, endorses the system...In a word, he who votes for an IMMORAL MAN,— A LAW-BREAKER, is at war with Jehovah’s government.”<sup>45</sup>

An Ohio state Liberty Party convention on February 7 sustained the hurried pace of preparations for the upcoming elections by nominating presidential electors and naming Leicester King as their candidate for governor. They resolved that Liberty Party men must do their duty to supply candidates for each and every election, from local coroner to the President of the United States.<sup>46</sup> In October, though their votes did not add up to victory, they did give the Liberty Party the balance of state political power once again. Again Oberlin cast its majority for King.<sup>47</sup> Ohio abolitionists could not directly pull the levers of government, but their influence in deciding

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<sup>41</sup> *Philanthropist*, September 17, 1842.

<sup>42</sup> *Philanthropist*, September 20, June 15, 1843.

<sup>43</sup> *Buckeye Sentinel*, July 2, 1844.

<sup>44</sup> *Huron Reflector*, August 27, 1844.

<sup>45</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, October 9, 1844; See also *Buckeye Sentinel*, quoted in *Lorain Republican*, July 3, 1844

<sup>46</sup> (Warren) *Liberty Herald*, February 22, 1844; See also *The Cincinnati Philanthropist and Weekly Herald*, June 26, 1844.

<sup>47</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 1, 1843, October 9, 1844; Archer H. Shaw, *The Plain Dealer, One Hundred Years in Cleveland* (New York, 1942), 76.

elections was unmistakable. Put into perspective, had Oberlin filled its First Church to only two thirds of its capacity with Whig voters, the Democratic governor-elect would have been sent home rather than to Columbus.<sup>48</sup>

In November, the Liberty Party again had the bittersweet victory of determining the results of an election, this time the presidency itself. James K. Polk was elected eleventh President of the United States, and the Liberty Party vote total of 62,054 far exceeded the Democratic margin of victory over the Whig Clay. Much has been made over the Liberty Party vote being the deciding factor in the New York results, giving Polk the edge and clinching the electoral advantage overall. However, the state of Ohio also accounted for 23 electoral votes, the third weightiest state in America. The Buckeye state was the only other state in the Union where the margin of victory was less than the Liberty Party total, giving those voters the balance of power in that state.<sup>49</sup>

The election of 1844 was a pivotal moment in the life of the Liberty Party and Ohio independent antislavery politics. The party had proven itself a force to be reckoned with on the national political scene, yet at a steep price. The influential *New York Tribune* thundered that the “third-party wire-workers” had forced Polk upon the nation rather than helping to elect the only anti-Texas candidate who could have realistically been elected. The editor laid “the curses of unborn generations” upon their heads. “Riot in your infamy,” he wrote to them, “and rejoice in its triumph, but never ask us to unite with you in anything.”<sup>50</sup> In an election that largely turned on the issue of Texas annexation, the Liberty Party had assured the election of the worst possible candidate in the Whigs’, and admittedly their own, eyes. As they had in

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<sup>48</sup> See (Guernsey) *Jeffersonian*, October 18, 1844.

<sup>49</sup> <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/index.html>, acc. October 30, 2008; *The Ohio Almanac*, ed. Damaine Vonada, (Wilmington, 1992), 114-117; See also (Guernsey) *Jeffersonian*, November 29, 1844.

<sup>50</sup> *New York Tribune*, November 28, 1844, quoted in Smith, *Liberty and Free Soil Parties*, 81.

1840, accusations began to fly that Birney and the Liberty Party were actually Democrats in disguise bent on subsidizing the election in Polk's favor.<sup>51</sup>

The Oberlin community refused to allow such accusations to stand. The town cast its vote almost entirely for Birney in 1844, and residents would have agreed with some Ohio Democrats who asked "Why do the Whigs accuse the 'Liberty party' with defeating Mr. Clay? Can not the Liberty party, with some propriety charge the Whigs with defeating Mr. Birney, and electing in his place Mr. Polk, a slave holder?"<sup>52</sup> Of the *nineteen* Clay supporters that a Whig newspaper claimed to have identified in Oberlin, many were not actually eligible for the franchise, and even more had repented of their ways by the time of the election.<sup>53</sup>

In the end, Oberlin residents lamented the glaring corruption of the major political parties, but nonetheless resolved to allow their consciences to rest easy. They trusted that God would arrange the ultimate outcome in their favor. "*Do right, and leave the issue with God,*" the *Oberlin Evangelist* counseled, and "Elevate good and not bad men to office. Make righteous and not unrighteous laws. 'Seek judgment, relieve the oppressed.' See that no cry go up to that higher tribunal evoking Heaven's wrath upon our guilty nation. Let the God of nations be honored and obeyed. Then we may trust the destinies of our nation with Him."<sup>54</sup>

When Texas officially became a state on December 29, 1845, the Oberlin community trembled at the thought of what lay in store for America. The Mexican government had warned that the annexation of Texas would be the cause for war, and upon Texas statehood, immediately broke off diplomatic relations with the United

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<sup>51</sup> See also Archer H. Shaw, *The Plain Dealer, One Hundred Years in Cleveland* (New York, 1942), 76; Seth Hinshaw, *Ohio Elects the President: Our State's Role in Presidential Elections, 1804-1996* (Manfield, 2000), 26-27; Smith, *Liberty and Free Soil Parties*, 80; (Guernsey) *Jeffersonian*, November 29, 1844; *Huron Reflector*, October 29, 1844

<sup>52</sup> (Guernsey) *Jeffersonian*, November 29, 1844.

<sup>53</sup> *Lorain Republican*, July 17, 1844.

<sup>54</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, November 20, 1844.

States. A dispute between the two nations over the exact location of the border between them led Polk to order General Zachary Taylor to the Rio Grande to enforce his own border claim. As American forces constructed Fort Texas on the north bank of the river opposite the city of Matamoros, 6000 Mexican troops on the south bank prepared for combat.<sup>55</sup>

The Oberlin community had always arrayed itself in opposition to war. A group of students had formed the Garrisonian-influenced Oberlin Non-Resistance Society in 1840.<sup>56</sup> In addition, the student Dialectic Society debated such topics as “Would it be our duty, should there be a levy, to take up arms?” and “Do the interests of our country demand the proposed standing army?”<sup>57</sup> In 1843, students and faculty formed a more moderate Oberlin Peace Society, chaired by Professor Amasa Walker, a member of the American Peace Society.<sup>58</sup> They also resolved themselves against war, but they recognized the necessity of defensive battle. In Peace Society debates, Professor Charles Grandison Finney acknowledged that only if war was fought for selfish reasons could it be considered a sin. Henry Cowles and John Morgan encouraged this opinion in later discussions as well.<sup>59</sup> In the pages of the *Oberlin*

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<sup>55</sup> See Douglas V. Meed, *The Mexican War: 1846-1848* (Oxford, 2002), 26-33.

<sup>56</sup> “Constitution of the Oberlin Non-Resistance Society,” RG 30/24, FP, Box 12, Folder 19, OCA; Geraldine Hopkins, “Garrison Abolition vs. Oberlin Anti-Slavery,” Unpublished honors paper, University of Northern Illinois, 1929, n.p. However, a disclaimer was appended to their constitution that sought to distance the organization from the Garrisonians. It declared that “we do not wish to have our principles confounded with those which may be nearly akin to ours in some respects, but we desire that they may rest upon their own foundations, but these alone.” It continued, “We are not anarchists. We disclaim all intention, or desire of waging a warfare against human governments, as such, for we believe them to be ‘ordained of God’ in such a sense that by them God determined to make a lesser evil destroy a greater one.”

<sup>57</sup> Dialectic Association Minutes, April, September, 1840, May 1841, RG 30/24, FP, Box 11, OCA.

<sup>58</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 10, 1843. Walker went as Oberlin’s delegate to the World’s Peace Conference in London in June of that year, and served as the meeting’s Vice President. Oberlin also sent delegates World’s Peace Conventions in 1849, 1850, and 1851. See Harold Josephson and Sandi E. Cooper, *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Peace Leaders* (Santa Barbara, 2005), 1102; Valerie H. Ziegler, *The Advocates of Peace in Antebellum America* (Macon, 2001), 202n6; Robert S. Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College: From 1833 to the Civil War* (Oberlin, 1943), 275-289.

<sup>59</sup> Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 275.

*Evangelist*, Cowles wrote that he believed that all international wars could be easily avoided.<sup>60</sup>

Polk's professed desire to take portions of Oregon from the British and conduct a war of expansion against Mexico only strengthened Oberlin's antiwar resolve. The *Oberlin Evangelist* wondered if land was so scarce in America that they "should be in such hot haste to grasp another empire?"<sup>61</sup> When U.S. forces invaded Mexico in 1846, the citizens of Oberlin gathered in a meeting of protest and resolved that the United States government had, "by an unconstitutional and outrageously unjust annexation of Texas...plunged the country into a war in which the God of justice and the common sentiment of the world are against us, and in which every blow struck on the part of this nation will be an act of robbery and murder."<sup>62</sup> The *Oberlin Evangelist* editors warned that "Wars of aggression like this we not only deprecate and deplore, but most unqualifiedly condemn. The conscience of the world and the court of heaven are against us, and we should not be disappointed if bitter woes betide our nation for it, to befall us ere all is over."<sup>63</sup>

The United States' aggression in Mexico was especially heinous in many Oberlinites' eyes because its outcome would likely bolster America's slave system, extending its reaches to the far West and possibly adding representatives from several new slave states to the national legislature. The *Oberlin Evangelist* reminded its readers that "it costs blood and treasure to sustain American Slavery. Our nation has only begun to foot these bills." The impending war with Mexico threatened to launch Americans into a contest in which God could not possibly side with them.<sup>64</sup> Oberlin's

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<sup>60</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, June 9, 1847; See also *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 4, 1844.

<sup>61</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 3, 1845; See also Joshua Giddings to Henry Cowles, March 1, 1845, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 19, OCA; *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 10, 1845.

<sup>62</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, June 10, 1846; *Liberator*, July 3, 1846; See also *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 27, 1846.

<sup>63</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 27, 1846.

<sup>64</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 10, 1845.

state legislative representative Edward Hamlin declared it “as evincing the craven spirit of a portion of the dough-faced democracy of the free states, licking the very dust from the footsteps of slavery” which also gave “fearful evidence of the extent of slavery’s power.”<sup>65</sup>

### ***“FREE SOIL, FREE SPEECH, FREE LABOR, AND FREE MEN”***

At the conclusion of the Mexican War in February 1848, Oberlinites mourned the expansion of slavery that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo made possible. As much of the nation celebrated America’s resounding victory, Oberlin grieved for its implications. Finney, Mahan, and a handful of other Oberlin leaders asserted in a Cleveland newspaper that the main ambition of America’s true “friends of freedom” should have been “the total prevention of the extension of Slavery over any of the territories now under the jurisdiction of this Government.”<sup>66</sup> The editor of the *Oberlin Evangelist* editorialized that bonfires, illuminations, celebrations, and congratulations were absurdly inappropriate “in the present crisis.” What was more appropriately characterized as “a dreadful sound...in the ear of the nation,” Oberlinites believed should be met with “confession, humiliation, sackcloth, and ashes.”<sup>67</sup>

Ironically, one of the few positive outcomes of the Mexican War was the rapid advancement in the North of segments of the Whig and Democratic parties towards halting the expansion of slavery. Pennsylvania Democratic Congressman David Wilmot had dropped a bombshell in 1846 by proposing to prevent the introduction of slavery into any territory gained as a result of the war. Yet the general tone of Northern politics was not one of humanitarianism. Wilmot himself called his proposal a “white man’s Proviso,” and combined his personal belief in white supremacy with a

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<sup>65</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 22, 1845.

<sup>66</sup> *Cleveland True Democrat*, August 2, 1848, in *The National Era*, August 10, 1848.

<sup>67</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, June 22, 1848.



desire for the non-extension of slavery.<sup>68</sup> He admitted that he possessed “no morbid sympathy for the slave,” and pled only for the rights of white men.<sup>69</sup> “By God, sir,” he once declared, “men born and nursed of white women are not going to be ruled by men who were brought up on the milk of some damn Negro wench!”<sup>70</sup> Even on the Western Reserve, Democrats resolved to stand by the Proviso and carry out its principles “regardless of all opposition.”<sup>71</sup>

Although the two mainstream parties debated slavery’s extension, the Oberlin community continued to embrace the Liberty Party. Even solid Garrisonians like Lucy Stone cheered the efforts of the independent party. “I wish God speed to all they do,” she wrote, “which is calculated to hasten the day of release to the wretched bondman...I am glad to have *anything* done for the poor, downtrodden slave, and do not care whether it is by the Old Organization or New Organization, for the oppressed.”<sup>72</sup> A Liberty Party rally in Oberlin in the summer of 1848 declared its allegiance to the Third Party because it embraced many of their valued antislavery principles including abolition in the District of Columbia, the divorce of the federal government from all involvement with slavery, the exclusion of slavery from the Territories, and the repeal of all state Black Laws, “and [made] their success the specific and paramount aim of its efforts.”<sup>73</sup>

Moreover, the Oberlin gathering also made its support contingent on the party standing “on some higher application of its principles,” especially “its old and vital ones”—including immediate emancipation. They clarified that “we love the Liberty

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<sup>68</sup> Jonathan Halperin Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery & the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel Hill, 2004), 138-139.

<sup>69</sup> Wilmot, quoted in Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago, 1961), 47.

<sup>70</sup> Wilmot, quoted in Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana, 1967), 126.

<sup>71</sup> *Sandusky Mirror*, n.d., in *National Era*, June 29, 1848.

<sup>72</sup> Lucy Stone to Francis Stone and Harriet Stone, February 15, 1846, RG 30/24, FP, Box 10, Folder 2, OCA.

<sup>73</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist* “Extra,” July 6, 1848.

Party only as an instrument for the enforcement of these principles and the success of these measures.” Whenever any new party should arise that embraced the same, “we shall rejoice to see the Liberty Party merged in this new party, whenever the hope of success in rationally increased thereby.”<sup>74</sup>

Nonetheless, not everyone in Oberlin had completely given up hope on the Whigs. The national Democratic Party had nominated anti-Wilmot man Lewis Cass for the presidency in May of 1848 on a platform sure to please its Southern members. Many antislavery voters held out faith that the Whigs would finally take the right ground, if only to oppose the unambiguous position of the Democracy.<sup>75</sup> The Oberlin community sent a small and guardedly-hopeful delegation to the Whig nominating convention in Cleveland. They were sorely disappointed. Professor Henry Cowles told his *Oberlin Evangelist* readers that he had witnessed “the lightning [that] announced the vote which placed Gen. Taylor, as the Whig nominee, before this nation.”<sup>76</sup> Zachary Taylor was a slaveholder who had distinguished himself in the Mexican War. Although his official views on the Wilmot Proviso were unknown, his nomination disheartened hopeful antislavery men. They had gone to the convention hoping to witness the nomination of United States Supreme Court justice John McLean of Ohio, whose anti-extension and antislavery views were among the more progressive of the Whigs and well known in his home state.<sup>77</sup> Taylor’s dominance, Henry Clay’s strong showing, and McLean’s clear lack of appeal to most Whigs at the convention “stunned” antislavery delegates “as is the ox,” Cowles wrote, “when smitten by an axe between his horns.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist* “Extra,” July 6, 1848.

<sup>75</sup> See *National Party Platforms of the United States, Presidential Candidates, Electoral and Popular Votes*, ed. J.M.H. Frederick (Akron, 1896), 17-18.

<sup>76</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, n.d., in *Liberator*, July 7, 1848.

<sup>77</sup> See Thomas G. Mitchell, *Antislavery Politics in Antebellum and Civil War America* (Westport, 2007), 33; Frederick J. Blue, *Salmon P. Chase: A Life in Politics* (Kent, 1987), 58-59.

<sup>78</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, n.d., in *Liberator*, July 7, 1848.

Cowles imagined a scene where a committed Whig met a staunch Democrat on the street. To the Democrat, the Whig asked, “‘Do I appear as degraded in your estimation, in consequence of my position, as you do in mine, in consequence of yours?’”<sup>79</sup> It was a question that some Whigs could not bear to ask. Most prominent among them was Western Reserve Congressman Joshua Giddings, who had declared even before the nominating convention that “‘Sooner than this right arm (lifted above his head) fall from its socket and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth that I will vote for Zach. Taylor for President.’”<sup>80</sup> Within a week after Taylor’s nomination, every county of the Western Reserve hosted a “people’s meeting,” without regard to party, to demand a national antislavery, anti-extension candidate.<sup>81</sup> The official call for a convention of “Friends of Freedom, Free Territory and Free Labor opposed to the election of Cass or Taylor” was issued by meeting of the “Friends of Free Territory of the State of Ohio,” to be held August 9 in Buffalo.<sup>82</sup>

The *National Era*, Gamaliel Bailey’s new paper in Washington, reported that there was not enough room in its pages even for brief notices of all the Free Soil meetings in Ohio. The people there seemed to be “cutting loose, *en masse*, from the old party organizations.”<sup>83</sup> In Oberlin, a meeting of Liberty Party faithful recommended that their members attend the Buffalo Convention to press forward their radical party goals. Just before the Buffalo gathering, Charles Grandison Finney, Henry Cowles, Asa Mahan, and other Oberlin notables highlighted in the *Cleveland True Democrat* the importance of cooperation among “friends of freedom of all

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<sup>79</sup> Oberlin Evangelist, n.d., in *Liberator*, July 7, 1848.

<sup>80</sup> Smith, *Liberty and Free Soil Parties*, 108-109; See also *New York Tribune*, n.d., in *National Era*, June 10, 1847. Douglas A. Gamble, “Joshua Giddings and the Ohio Abolitionists: A Study in Radical Politics,” *The Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, Vol.88 (Winter, 1979), 46.

<sup>81</sup> A.G. Riddle, “Rise of the Anti-Slavery Sentiment on the Western Reserve,” *Magazine of Western History* (June, 1887), 145-156.

<sup>82</sup> *National Era*, July 6, 1848; *Addresses and Proceedings of the State Independent Free Territory Convention of the People of Ohio, Held at Columbus, June 20 and 21, 1848* (Cincinnati, 1848), 6.

<sup>83</sup> *National Era*, July 20, 1848; See also *National Era* June 9, 1848.

parties” at the upcoming convention. A “true Abolitionist,” they maintained, was any person “who sincerely holds chattel slavery, in all its forms, to be intrinsically wrong, and who is heartily devoted, in the use of all the means which he honestly judges to be lawful and wise, to its total extinction.”<sup>84</sup> Right then, the primary attention of antislavery voters should be the divorce of the federal government “from the dominion of the Slave Power” as well as the extension of slavery over territory over which it had jurisdiction. They believed that these were the “*Great* issues of the approaching presidential election,” and to meet them, “all the friends of freedom should unite in a patriotic forgetfulness of former party pledges, party ties, and predilections.”<sup>85</sup>

When the Buffalo Convention assembled in August under the “Great Oberlin Tent” that Finney had brought with him to Oberlin in 1835, its membership was made up of Liberty Party men, “Conscience” Whigs who opposed slavery, and “Barnburner” Democrats who were pro-Wilmot and opposed to slavery’s extension.<sup>86</sup> Delegates were rightfully uncertain whether groups as diverse as the abolitionist Liberty Party contingent could find common ground with Democrats who simply offered the provisions of the Wilmot proviso as the extent of their opposition to slavery’s expansion. Moreover, the Barnburners and Liberty Party had already nominated candidates for the presidency, Martin Van Buren and John P. Hale, respectively. The Whigs had a slate of hopefuls themselves including Giddings and Charles Francis Adams, son of the late President and Congressman John Quincy Adams.<sup>87</sup>

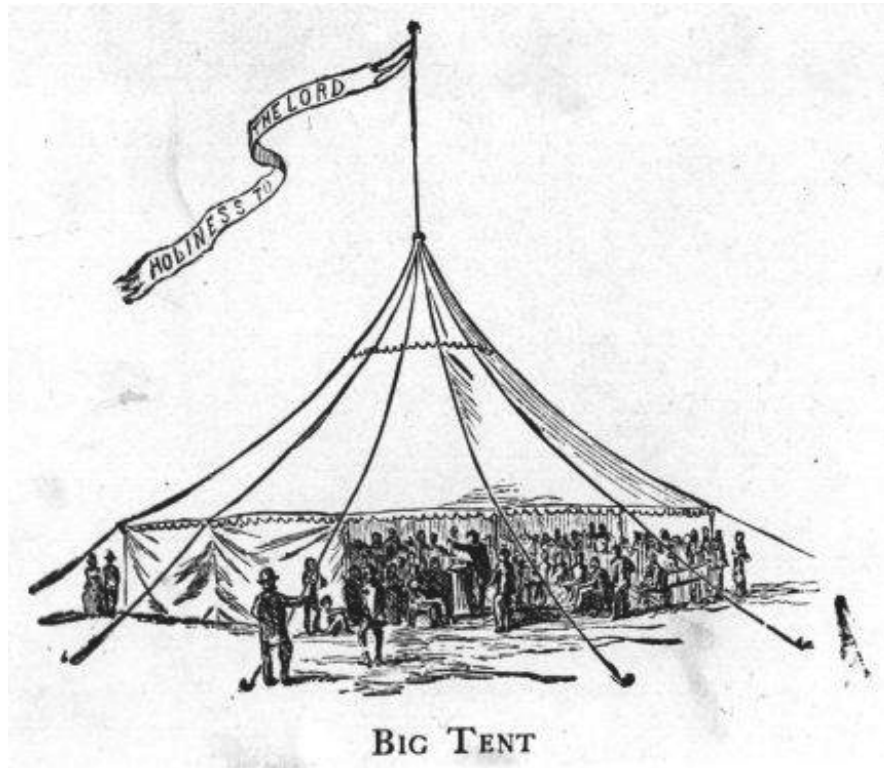
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<sup>84</sup> *Cleveland True Democrat*, August 2, 1848, in *The National Era*, August 10, 1848. These men were also either the editors or frequent contributors to the *Oberlin Evangelist*. However, their explicit endorsement of a particular political party did not appear in that newspaper because of a series of pledges found in its first issue, including “Not to promote party or sectarian interests.” See *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 20, 1838.

<sup>85</sup> *Cleveland True Democrat*, August 2, 1848, in *The National Era*, August 10, 1848.

<sup>86</sup> *The North Star*, August 11, 1848; See also O.C. Gardiner, *The Great Issue, or, The Three Presidential Candidates; Being, a Brief Historical Sketch of the Free Soil Question in the United States, From the Congresses of 1784 and '87 to the Present Time* (New York, 1848), 3-10, 137-151.

<sup>87</sup> See Henry C. Wright to William Lloyd Garrison, October 26, 1847, in *Liberator*, November 19, 1847; Smith, *Liberty and Free Soil Parties*, 138.



**Illustration 7.1: The Oberlin "Big Tent"**  
(from Shumway, *Oberliniana* (1883))

The Oberlin delegation was headed by its college president Asa Mahan, who, according to Martin Delaney, was one of the most prominent speakers at the convention.<sup>88</sup> They brought with them their charge by Oberlin Liberty Party men to represent their interests, and to pledge to the Convention and its nominees their support if its platform and candidates “ably and adequately represent[ed] them.”<sup>89</sup> It became clear early on that the Barnburners, the most numerous of the various blocs, would not accept any presidential nominee but their own. Although Martin Van Buren bore a name that Oberlin men had historically considered “synonymous in the history of this country with servility,” the Liberty Party contingent supported his

<sup>88</sup> Martin Delaney to Frederick Douglass, June 1, 1848, in *The North Star*, July 14, 1848; *The North Star*, August 11, 1848; See also *Liberator*, September 8, 1848.

<sup>89</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist* “Extra,” July 6, 1848.

nomination on the condition that the convention adopt a platform that more closely aligned with their own demands than those of the Democratic defectors.<sup>90</sup>

Thus the first ever convention of the national Free Soil Party put forward the ticket of Van Buren and Charles F. Adams upon a “national platform of freedom in opposition to the sectional platform of slavery.” It demanded the government abolish slavery where it possessed the constitutional power to do so and to prohibit its extension into the Territories. They resolved their motto to be “Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor, and Free Men,” under which they would “fight ever, until a triumphant victory will reward our exertions.”<sup>91</sup> “Henceforth,” the editor of the *Oberlin Evangelist* rejoiced, “there will be in reality but two great political parties in this country—the party of the South, composed of Southern slaveholders, and a few Northern office expectants with Southern principles, on the one hand—and the FREE DEMOCRACY of the nation, and especially the North, on the other.”<sup>92</sup>

This sentiment certainly saw the Free Soil glass as half full from an antislavery point of view. In fact, Free Soil in 1848 was far less progressive than most Oberlinites cared to admit. To be sure, the party was the only one which refused to endorse slavery, but the complaint of the majority of its members was against the dictations of the Slave Power rather than slavery itself. The Buffalo platform pledged no interference with slavery within the limits of any state. Another resolution invoked the name of slaveholder Thomas Jefferson in asserting that the original policy of the nation was “to limit, localize, and discourage slavery.”<sup>93</sup> Yet this was far from a commitment to abolitionism. Rather, it was the manifestation of the antislavery limits of the majority of Free Soilers: former Democrats who shared the racism of the men

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<sup>90</sup> Sereno W. Streeter to Henry Cowles, August 14, 1848, Henry Cowles Papers, RG 30/27, Box 3, OCA; See also *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 16, 1848.

<sup>91</sup> Frederick, *National Party Platforms*, 19-20.

<sup>92</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 16, 1848.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*

who led them such as David Wilmot. They were willing to leave the institution of slavery alone, so long as those who continued to practice it limited it (and all African Americans) to the South.

The party's nominal opposition to slavery as well as the support and participation in the proceedings of African American notables such as Frederick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnet seemed to many more significant than the platform's silence on equal rights and the racist tinge of the desire to make the territories a haven from the "degrading" competition of slavery. As one historian notes, to consider slavery bad policy because it threatened the prosperity of white workers was quite different from considering slavery a heinous sin because it infringed upon God-given freedom. In fact, the logic of many Free Soilers smacked of the same spirit which upheld the Ohio Black Laws.<sup>94</sup>

This struck many abolitionists as an abandonment of their antislavery principles and a precipitous retreat from the former Liberty Party standard. Even Gerrit Smith, perhaps Oberlin's greatest antebellum financial supporter, lamented that "but few are left to govern their votes by such considerations as I govern my own." He predicted that of the seventy thousand people who belonged to the Free Soil Party, not one thousand would insist that their candidates be abolitionists. "When I see such wise and good men, as compose the Faculty of Oberlin Institute, adopting their ethics to the emergency," Smith wrote, "I expect nothing better than but here and there one will be found able to keep himself from being carried off in the flood of defection."<sup>95</sup>

Most of the Oberlin community did not see any problem with addressing their immediate concerns "to the emergency." Indeed, the emergency in the late 1840s and early 1850s was the battle over the extension of slavery into Western territories. They

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<sup>94</sup> Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York, 1998), 384.

<sup>95</sup> *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, August 31, 1848.

believed that the type of ideological consistency demanded by Gerrit Smith, William Lloyd Garrison, and others would not immediately free any slaves. Restricting one's self to the support of only those antislavery strategies that demanded only immediate emancipation promised few positive results. However, a political party that potentially held the balance of power in national and state elections at a critical moment when the issue of slavery extension was before the nation had much more potential for tangible consequences. Better attempt to limit slavery now than miss the opportunity to check its advance across the continent.

The editor of the *Oberlin Evangelist* reported that when "the principles and aims of a party are only good, and involve nothing morally wrong, we go with it heart and soul." Even though he realized that they could not hope to immediately gain all that they may have wished, they were, as always, willing to follow the path that offered the most realistic potential under the circumstances.<sup>96</sup> After the Buffalo convention, the *Oberlin Evangelist* declared the Free Soil movement in harmony with God's will, and agreed with one Oberlin delegate that "'God is moving the elements, and moving *in* them, and will doubtless bring his own truths to accomplish whereunto He has sent it.'"<sup>97</sup> Moreover, the faculty pointed out in their article in the *True Democrat* that antislavery men elected now would form a core of leadership for future reinforcements to rally around, making the ultimate goal of total emancipation possible at a later date.<sup>98</sup> Just as a line from one of Oberlin alumnus George Clarke's anti-slavery songs from that year proclaimed

Huzza for Free Soil! Free Soil evermore,  
Till its boundaries embrace on our land every shore;  
And should traitors essay the foul curse to extend,

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<sup>96</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 30, 1848.

<sup>97</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 27, 1848.

<sup>98</sup> *Cleveland True Democrat*, August 2, 1848, in *The National Era*, August 10, 1848.



Shall it any less speedily come to its end?<sup>99</sup>

Oberlinites were only slightly put off by nonresistant Garrisonian critics who pointed out the compromises necessary to succeed in the political world and considered the Free Soilers insufferably conservative. When it came to agitating the slavery issue, Oberlin abolitionists appreciated the value of the most radical reformers just as they had in the 1830s. Radical agitators' uncompromising moral appeals pushed the limits of the debate. As the radical extreme advanced, so too did the center; the radicals enlarged the realm of the possible for the politicians. The more extreme the demand of the strictly moral agitator, the more reasonable and attractive the propositions of the more moderate antislavery politician appeared. Moderate abolitionists were the ones to shepherd the growing centrist body of those sympathetic to abolitionist and antislavery measures into a popular movement with the power to effect truly radical changes to the government from within.

It would be a mistake, however, to always consider the moral agitators and the politicians as mutually exclusive groups. Most Oberlinites were immediatist agitators who also happened to seek change through politics. Their commitment to antislavery started from their perfectionist understanding of moral law, developed in their churches and antislavery societies, and applied to their political agenda. The obligation for men to obey and participate in human governments, Finney wrote, "while they legislate upon the principles of the moral law, is as unalterable as the moral law itself."<sup>100</sup> Though many of the Free Soilers in 1848 would have settled for far less than emancipation, Oberlin abolitionists and most other former Liberty Party supporters would not. Rather, they hoped to secure whatever victories they could,

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<sup>99</sup> "Free Soil Song," in George W. Clarke, *The Free Soil Minstrel* (New York, 1848), 222-223.

<sup>100</sup> Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology, Embracing, Lectures on Moral Government, Together with Atonement, Moral and Physical Depravity, Regeneration, Philosophical Theories, and Evidences of Regeneration* (Oberlin, 1846), 428.

such as non-extension, abolition in Washington, D.C., or the repeal of Black Laws, while they continued their demands for immediate and full emancipation.

Oberlin's African American population was also fully involved in the political and reform movements of 1848. In early September 1848, Oberlin sent a proud delegation of its citizens, students, and alumni to the Colored National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio. Besides the performance of a rousing "Liberty song" from Oberlinites Sabram Cox and William Howard Day at the opening of the second day's session, the Oberlin contingent used its numerous positions of leadership in the convention to shape the direction of the national African American reform agenda.<sup>101</sup> Day was chosen as the convention's secretary, and he was to be supported by the assistant secretary, Oberlin student Justin Holland. Day and Charles Langston also served on the Business Committee responsible for drafting the resolutions of the convention.<sup>102</sup>

The gathering highlighted several of the prominent issues facing African American reformers such as the value of temperance, respectable employment, and education. Delegates firmly resolved that "Slavery is the greatest curse ever inflicted on man, being of hellish origin, the legitimate offspring of the Devil," and pledged themselves "to use all justifiable means for its speedy and immediate overthrow." When it came to the question of just what those means included, the Business Committee revealed its proclivity towards the brand of political action represented by the new Free Soil Party. With the realization that in Ohio they viewed political involvement in a much favorable light than some of their fellows nationwide, the

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<sup>101</sup> *Report of the Proceedings of the Colored National Convention, Held at Cleveland, Ohio, on Wednesday, September 6, 1848* (Rochester, 1848), 4.

<sup>102</sup> *Report of the Proceedings of the Colored National Convention... 1848*, 3; For more on Justin Holland, see Jeffrey J. Noonan, *The Guitar in America: Victorian Era to Jazz Age* (Jackson, 2008), 61-62; Benjamin Griffith Brawley, *The Negro Genius: A New Appraisal of the Achievement of the American Negro in Literature and the Fine Arts* (New York, 1966), 94.

committee resolved that though their efforts would remain moral in their tendency, it was no less the duty of the every member of the convention to take notice of the Liberty Party and counsel them in the “course which shall best promote the cause of Liberty and Humanity.” They agreed that slavery could not be abolished through moral suasion alone since the two great political parties had “betrayed the sacred cause of human freedom.”<sup>103</sup>

The convention adopted a resolution to recommend the Free Soil Party and the platform developed at the Buffalo Convention to the support of African Americans everywhere. They remained determined to maintain the high standard and liberal views that had always characterized them as a body.<sup>104</sup> Still, Charles Langston, Day, and others could not secure the passage of their resolutions that recommended that all African Americans who possessed the franchise use it to secure the Free Soil candidates in office. Their enthusiastic characterization of the Free Soil Party as one that was “bound together by a common sentiment expressing the wish of a large portion of the people of this Union,” and which represented “the dawn of a bright and more auspicious day” was rejected by the majority of the convention’s delegates.<sup>105</sup> The “common sentiment” of the Oberlin delegation was apparently not the same as the convention as a whole.

Oberlinites, Black and white, were coming to the conclusion that in a country where suffrage was universal, a national reform could not be carried without votes. As Professor James Monroe wrote, even if the standards of political opinion were not as demanding as they may have desired, abolitionists must constantly strive to elevate them. If the Free Soil Party did not embrace every measure committed abolitionists desired, they embraced a great many of them, and in doing so potentially gained the

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<sup>103</sup> *Report of the Proceedings of the Colored National Convention... 1848*, 14-15.

<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*, 14-15.

numbers necessary to implement them all. In Monroe's words, most Oberlinites were willing that anti-slavery principles be brought forward one at a time, if, by doing so, a party could be secured strong enough to give each successive principle a triumph, "first the blade, then the ear, and then the full corn in the ear." "Hungry men," Monroe figured, "might wish that the full corn in the ear should be produced at once, but the constitution of nature is otherwise."<sup>106</sup>

Free Soilers were disappointed by the November election returns, though they showed much stronger than the Liberty Party had in 1840 and 1844. The party and Martin Van Buren polled just twenty one percent of the vote garnered by the Whig, Taylor. Russia Township, of which Oberlin made up the greatest part, registered its support solidly behind the Free Soil candidate. The closest competitor was New York's Gerrit Smith, nominated by the remnants of the Liberty Party who could not stomach the "compromises" of the new coalition, who polled a third of the votes given Van Buren. Lorain County was one of only six counties in Ohio to give a plurality of their votes to Van Buren.<sup>107</sup>

The Oberlin community once again balanced the sting of defeat with faith in ultimate victory. Charles Finney grieved the outcome of the election, especially the fact that so many Northerners accommodated themselves to the demands of the Slave Power. In an emotional and teary Thanksgiving sermon just days after the presidency had been decided, he prayed that the arrogant Southern aristocrats would continue to "spit in the dough-faces of the North until they provoked them to put an end to slavery."<sup>108</sup> The *Oberlin Evangelist* announced Taylor's election, but the editor hoped

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<sup>106</sup> James Monroe, "My First Legislative Experience: Work in the Legislature," in *Oberlin Thursday Lectures: Addresses and Essays* (Oberlin, 1897), 148-150.

<sup>107</sup> *The Cleveland Herald*, November 16, 25, 1848; (Chillicothe) *The Scioto Gazette*, November 29, 1848; E. H. Roseboom and F. P. Weisenberger, *History of the State of Ohio*, Vol.III (New York, 1934), 468-70.

<sup>108</sup> Charles Penfield to Helen M. Cowles, November 21, 1848, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 19, OCA.

“that whatever wrath, or guilt, or error of man may be involved in it, the Lord will over-rule to his own praise, and the remainder thereof, will restrain.”<sup>109</sup>

***“OUR ELEVATION, MORAL, INTELLECTUAL, AND POLITICAL”***

Throughout the clamor of the political season, the Oberlin community continued to press the other goal of their abolitionism, equal rights for free African Americans. This had been an important plank in the Liberty Party platforms of 1840 and 1844, and though the conservative majority of the Free Soil coalition dropped the demand in 1848, it had remained a vital issue as Oberlin voters selected local and statewide officers. Yet while Oberlin’s politicians had been forced to compromise in the presidential campaign and sacrifice, politically, the demand for immediate emancipation and equal rights to free soil nationally, the town’s African American population led the radical moral push to retain the link between antislavery and African American rights.

After the National Colored Convention in September, the leaders of Oberlin’s Black community hoped to advance their cause even further on their home turf of Ohio. Immediately following the national convention, Charles Langston issued a call for a state Black convention to be held in Columbus in January 1849. The main objects of their deliberations would be “our elevation, moral, intellectual, and political,” with special attention to be paid to Ohio’s Black Laws.<sup>110</sup> After Langston was selected the convention’s president, a Business Committee including Oberlin alumni William Howard Day, John Mercer Langston, and John M. Brown developed a

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<sup>109</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, November 22, 1848.

<sup>110</sup> *The North Star*, December 8, 1848.

series of resolutions, many of which appear to have been drawn directly from a meeting of Oberlin African Americans which was held the previous month.<sup>111</sup>

The delegates to the Ohio convention resolved to do all within their power not only to repeal their state's Black Laws, but any and all state and federal laws that made distinctions based on color. Towns were asked to contribute to a fund to support Black lecturers in their crusade to bring the evils of the laws before the populace. They expressed their patriotism and rejected all colonization schemes which sought to force their removal to any other region of the world, insisting that with the proper education and training, African Americans could compete with anyone of any complexion.<sup>112</sup> Any person, black or white, who "failed to treat other colored men on terms of perfect equality with the whites in all cases," was to be judged "as recreant to the dearest cause, and should be esteemed outcasts."<sup>113</sup>

Significantly, the Ohio delegates also hoped to push African Americans nationally towards physical resistance against the Slave Power in the North and South. Quoting the familiar verse of Lord Byron, the Business Committee declared that one "who would be free, himself must strike the blow." They eagerly urged the Southern bondsman "to leave immediately with his hoe on his shoulder, for a land of liberty," and called for free African Americans to aid "our brothers and sisters in fleeing from the prison-house of bondage to the land of freedom." Moreover, all were advised to keep a sharp lookout "for men-thieves and their abettors," and when found, to warn them that no person claimed as a slave would be taken from their midst "without

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<sup>111</sup> "Minutes and Address of the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio, Convened at Columbus, January 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, & 13<sup>th</sup>, 1849, in *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865*, Vol.I, ed Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker (Philadelphia, 1979), 220-221; *The North Star*, January 12, 1849; *Columbus Journal*, n.d., in *Liberator*, January 26, March 2, 1849 and *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 14, 1849.

<sup>112</sup> Interestingly, John Mercer Langston was one of the few delegates in favor of emigration, and he argued that American racism was too powerful for African Americans to live peaceful lives in its midst. Eventually, even Langston came out as a forceful opponent of any removal scheme. See "State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio...1849," 223-226.

<sup>113</sup> "State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio...1849," 228-231.

trouble.” In an acknowledgement of two African American prophets who had urged violent resistance ahead of its time, the convention recommended that five hundred copies of David Walker’s 1829 “Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World” and Henry Highland Garnet’s 1843 “An Address to the Slaves of the United States” be “gratuitously circulated.”<sup>114</sup>

This meeting was a watershed moment for Ohio African American abolitionists. The *Oberlin Evangelist* lauded the Oberlin community’s leadership of the Colored Conventions of 1848 and 1849, and declared that the meetings “served to give impulse to a mass of mind too long and too cruelly crushed, and also to give character before the world to their determined efforts for real improvement.”<sup>115</sup> The 1849 Ohio convention was granted the use of the chamber of the Ohio House of Representatives on the evening of January 11. There, William Howard Day delivered an eloquent address upon the history of abuses suffered by African Americans compared to those borne by the founding fathers under the rule of Great Britain.<sup>116</sup> Frederick Douglass called the event and Day’s speech before the legislative chamber “an incident in our history well worthy of reflection and remark. The colored man has been allowed to come up, without insult and without reproach—to enter into a place hitherto deemed sacred to the white man alone, and standing there to plead his right to be deemed a man and a brother...to say ‘our God,’ and to beg permission to say ‘our country.’”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> “State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio...1849,” 229-230. Walker was a free African American originally from the South urged slaves to revolt against their masters, spoke out against colonization, and hoped to instill racial pride in his intended Black readership. Garnet’s “Address” was presented at the 1843 National Black Convention in Buffalo. In it, he also called for slaves to openly rebel against their masters. At the time, most African American abolitionists (such as Frederick Douglass, Charles L. Remond, and William Wells Brown) still considered themselves nonresistant Garrisonians. After much debate, Garnet’s speech was rejected by the convention by one vote. For more on Walker, Garnet, and their respective addresses, see Sterling Stucky, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York, 1987), 98-192.

<sup>115</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 6, 1849.

<sup>116</sup> *The North Star*, January 26, 1849.

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*; See also *New York Evangelist*, January 25, 1849.

The constant agitation and pressure of Oberlin's African American alumni, students, and town residents against the state's Black Laws was a key reason that "repealism" remained an important adjunct of the Oberlin community's abolitionism.<sup>118</sup> This was the case even when arguing against these unjust laws brought criticism from abolitionist friends or threats of violence from less friendly quarters. Though Oberlin alumna Betsey Mix Cowles was a close friend of Abby Kelley Foster and considered herself a solid Garrisonian, she refused to shy away from the promotion of antislavery politics, especially since she believed it offered the clearest way to remove the legal disabilities of Ohio's African American population. In 1846, she used funds gathered at the annual meeting of the Ashtabula County Female Anti-Slavery Society to begin publication of a newspaper she titled *A Plea for the Oppressed*, devoted to agitation, largely political, against the Black Laws. Though the sheet only survived a short run, it was a powerful voice against discriminatory legislation and was enthusiastically supported by both Liberty Party members and many Ohio Whigs.<sup>119</sup>

However, despite support from political abolitionists and even many Garrisonians in Ohio, Eastern nonresistants heaped criticism upon Cowles and her editorial project. Since Cowles had presented her prospectus at an Ashtabula County Female Anti-Slavery Society meeting that met concurrently with a group of Liberty Party men, radical Garrisonian Parker Pillsbury criticized the *Plea's* supporters in Ohio as being under the controlling influence of those who ought to have been their adversaries, the political abolitionists.<sup>120</sup> Maria Weston Chapman wrote to Abby Kelley Foster from Boston afraid that Cowles' efforts "went to build up our worst

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<sup>118</sup> See Stephen Middleton, *The Black Laws: Race and the Legal Process in Early Ohio* (Athens, 2005), 123.

<sup>119</sup> See *The Ohio Observer*, November 18, 1846; Harriet Taylor Upton, *History of the Western Reserve*, Vol.I (Chicago, 1910), 555.

<sup>120</sup> *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, August 14, 1846.



foe,” and if that was the case, “it had better never been.” The fact that the Whig candidate for governor allegedly endorsed the *Plea* caused Kelley Foster to regret even the appearance “that Slaveocrats use our money.”<sup>121</sup>

The “petty bickering” over the *Plea* may have led Cowles to distance herself from Eastern Garrisonians, and they from her.<sup>122</sup> Still, she continued to work tirelessly for the repeal of the Black Laws through the Garrisonian Western Anti-Slavery Society. Her open mindedness on all things antislavery encouraged Oberlin Professor Timothy Hudson, on behalf of the “New Org,” to ask her for data that she gathered for the *Plea* to be used in an American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society pamphlet towards that end.<sup>123</sup> As the slavery issue was increasingly agitated in the public’s mind, the A.F.A.S.S hoped to “fix the eyes of the people of the free states on their own legislation” since “a large portion of the voters even in the free states, are ignorant of the enormities even of their own laws.”<sup>124</sup>

“Friendly fire” was not the only risk abolitionists faced in their crusade against the Black Laws. Reminiscent of the dire straits in which Oberlin’s abolitionists were placed in the 1830s, those men and women who urged racial egalitarianism upon an often-resistant populace faced violent reactions to their message.<sup>125</sup> Late in May of 1848, Charles Langston, on a lecture tour with Martin Delaney, stopped in the central Ohio town of Marseilles to convene a meeting in opposition to slavery and the Black Laws. As the two men began their walk to the meeting place that evening, they were closely followed by a gang of young men who taunted and directed curses at them.

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<sup>121</sup> Abby Kelley to Betsey Mix Cowles, November 8, 1846, Bestey Mix Cowles papers (hereafter BMC), Kent State University Archives and Special Collections (hereafter Kent State); See also Linda L. Geary, *Balanced in the Wind: A Biography of Betsey Mix Cowles* (Lewisburg, 1989), 57-59.

<sup>122</sup> Geary, *Balanced in the Wind*, 60.

<sup>123</sup> Timothy B. Hudson to Betsey Mix Cowles, January 20, 1848, BMC, Kent State; Timothy B. Hudson to James G. Birney, January 20, 1848, *Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831-1857*, Vol.II, ed. Dwight L. DuMond (New York, 1938), 1089-1090.

<sup>124</sup> Timothy B. Hudson to Betsey Mix Cowles, January 20, 1848, BMC, Kent State.

<sup>125</sup> See Martin R. Delaney to Frederick Douglass, March 22, 1848, in *The North Star*, April 7, 1848.

Once they reached the venue, Langston overheard the plans of between forty and fifty ruffians to violently disrupt the meeting.<sup>126</sup>

The abolitionists could not speak before such a hostile and potentially dangerous crowd, and after one of the ruffians stood and declared “I move that we adjourn, by considering this a darkey burlesque,” Langston and Delaney left the hall to the continuing cries of “‘darkey burlesque!’ with many other epithets of disparagement.” Later, as the two abolitionists looked out their window, they witnessed a gathering crowd who were raising a commotion with “a brass drum, a tamborine, a clarionet, violin, jaw-bone of a horse, castanets, and a number of other instruments, or whatever would tend to excite and rally a formidable mob.” The crowd included “well nigh all of the men and boys in the neighborhood “who were able to throw a brickbat.”<sup>127</sup>

Delaney recalled that failing to find sufficient tar for a proper tar and feathering, the mob simply set the empty pitch barrel aflame along with empty boxes that produced a blaze big enough to be seen for miles around. When this failed to draw out the abolitionists, the crowd decided that they would instead break into their room, handcuff them, and immediately take them south where each of them, as slaves, might bring \$1500 cash. This Delaney and Langston determined to resist to the death, since they were “not slaves, nor will we tamely suffer the treatment of slaves, let it come from a high or low source, or from wherever it may.”<sup>128</sup>

Eventually the mob tired after several hours of what the abolitionists could only describe as “ferocious blackguardism,” having become drunk and run out of objects to burn. They did admonish the bellhop to beat their brass drum if the abolitionists attempted to escape in the night, and declared within their hearing that

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<sup>126</sup> Martin R. Delaney to Frederick Douglass, June 1, 1848, in *The North Star*, July 14, 1848.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*

they “would neither eat nor drink, till they took our lives.” When the men left town that morning, they found only six sleeping ruffians remaining in the street, and were able to escape Marseilles with only a few stones hurled at their buggy on their way out of town.<sup>129</sup>

### ***“THE ELEVATION OF THE COLORED AMERICAN, HALF-FREE”***

The national Free Soil platform was not friendly towards “repealism.” However, the party’s local success in Ohio was what finally led to the end of the laws in that state. The Free Soil ticket had sent eight men to the Ohio House of Representatives in 1848, including Oberlin Institute trustee Norton S. Townsend and John F. Morse, another abolitionist with strong Oberlin connections.<sup>130</sup> When the weighty questions of organizing the House and deciding two contested elections arose as the first orders of business, all of the Ohio Free Soilers but Morse and Townsend split back into their former parties. For nearly a month, Whigs and Democrats battled for the quorum necessary to control the body.

Salmon P. Chase wrote to another politician that he feared the rising bitterness would result in the dissolution of the legislature, and perhaps even bloodshed, had not the Free Soilers intervened. Townsend was named to a committee of three to decide the fate of the contested offices. He had been sent to the legislature by the Free Soil

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<sup>129</sup> Martin R. Delaney to Frederick Douglass, June 1, 1848, in *The North Star*, July 14, 1848.

<sup>130</sup> *The National Era*, January 18, February 1, 1849; Nelson E. Jones, *The Squirrel Hunters of Ohio, or, Glimpses of Pioneer Life* (Cincinnati, 1898), 74. Norton Strange Townsend was born in England, but moved to the United States at an early age. He studied medicine in Cincinnati in the late 1820s and early 1830s. There, he was an active agent of the Underground Railroad. It was also in Cincinnati that he struck up enduring friendships with Salmon P. Chase and *Philanthropist* editor James G. Birney. He began his medical practice in Elyria in 1840, and was selected that same year to be the Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society’s delegate to the World’s Anti-Slavery convention in London. He was named to the Oberlin Institute board of trustees in 1845. See Frederick J. Blue and Robert McCormick, “Norton S. Townshend: A Reformer for all Seasons,” in *The Pursuit of Public Power: Political Culture in Ohio, 1787-1861*, ed. Jeffery P. Brown and Andrew R.L. Cayton (Kent, 1994), 144-154; *The Phrenological Journal and Science of Health*, Vol.106, No.1 (July, 1898), 15-20; William H. Seibert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1898), 104; William H. Seibert, *Mysteries of Ohio’s Underground Railroads* (Columbus, 1951), 33n12.

citizens of Lorain County with the charge that he “act with any party, or against any party, as in his judgment the cause of freedom should require.”<sup>131</sup> He proposed a deal by which he would support whichever party promised to support a bill for the repeal of many of Ohio’s Black Laws. Whigs, angry at what they saw as the defection of two progressive independents, were cool to the proposals, yet the Democrats, eager to gain power in the state, expressed interest.<sup>132</sup> Townsend’s was the deciding vote which gave the surprisingly cooperative Democrats control of the disputed seats.

Even with the two seats in the Democratic column, neither major party possessed the quorum necessary to organize the House. To this end, Morse, Townsend, Democratic leaders, and Free Soil organizer Chase struck a deal by which Morse and Townsend agreed to help the Democrats organize the House. It would give the Democrats control over the Speakership and all the valuable powers of patronage which that entailed. In return, the Free Soilers were given the assurance that their man, Chase, would be selected as Ohio’s Senator.<sup>133</sup> Townsend and Morse also continued to insist on their most important demand for their cooperation: the repeal of some of the most galling of the state’s Black Laws.<sup>134</sup> These included prohibitions on publicly funded schools for African American children, settlement of African Americans in Ohio without a \$500 bond and certified freedom certificate, the employment of African Americans without properly recorded freedom papers, and the exclusion of African American testimony in court when white litigants were

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<sup>131</sup> *The National Era*, October 26, 1848, January 18, 1849; Norton S. Townsend, “Salmon P. Chase,” *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, Vol.I (September, 1887), 117.

<sup>132</sup> Townsend, “Salmon P. Chase,” 120; *The National Era*, March 22, 1849.

<sup>133</sup> Townsend had been an acquaintance of Chase’s for many years. He first met him when Chase was arguing a case in favor of an alleged fugitive slave in Cincinnati in 1837. After hearing Chase’s arguments, Townsend declared, “There is a man I can and will vote for whenever I have the opportunity.” Townsend, “Salmon P. Chase,” 117.

<sup>134</sup> Townsend had run on the promise of working for the repeal of all Black Laws. Before the election, he declared that “I wish all record of the [the Black Laws] could be blotted from the otherwise fair pages of [Ohio’s] history.” *Elyria Courier*, September 12, 1848.

involved.<sup>135</sup> Townsend and Morse demanded a written pledge from all those who would benefit from their support that these infamous laws would be wiped from the books that session.<sup>136</sup>



**Illustration 7.2: Norton S. Townsend**  
**((from Townsend, *History of Agriculture in Ohio* (1888))**

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<sup>135</sup> Conservatives were able to amend the final repeal Bill so that it did not erase the bar to African American service on juries or the legal impediment to their being able to vote. See Townsend, "Salmon P. Chase," 119-120.

<sup>136</sup> *The National Era*, March 8, 1849; *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 28, 1849; Stanley Matthews to Salmon P. Chase, January 11, 1849, in Edgar Allan Holt, "Party Politics in Ohio, 1840-1850," *Ohio Historical and Archaeological Quarterly*, Vol.38 (1928), 361; Hart, *Salmon Portland Chase*, 107-112; G. Frederick Wright, *A Standard History of Lorain County: An Authentic Narrative of the Past, with Particular Attention to the Modern Era in the Commercial, Industrial, and Social Development. A Chronicle of the People, with Family Lineage and Memoirs*, Vol.I, (Chicago, 1916), 229; Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 2005), 135.

Townsend's actions in the House brought upon him the scorn of many Ohio Whigs and Whig-leaning Free Soilers. One "independent" Free Soiler called him the "black hearted miscreant from Lorain county," a man who "would require an act of omnipotence to bring...up to the level of a Judas Iscariot, or Benedict Arnold."<sup>137</sup> Townsend's sin lay in his bucking the racist Free Soil majority and being one of a minority of party men who sought equal rights for African Americans. With regards to the main party plank, the non-extension of slavery, Townsend believed that the "boundless West" should be "preserved as an asylum for the homeless, whether male or female, black or white, native or alien."<sup>138</sup>

Predictably, Townsend had to constantly defend himself before the House. After one barrage of insults by Whigs and Free Soilers in May, he turned the other cheek and declared that "My blows shall always be reserved for the enemies of freedom, and not expended upon its friends, however severely they may feel disposed to condemn any action of mine." He believed that it was his fate to be regarded as a "political Jonah, who must be thrown overboard, to secure the safety and preservation of the Free Soil bark," yet he enthusiastically welcomed his ostracism. He declared that he cared infinitely more for freedom than for his own standing in the Free Soil party. Townsend considered himself under no obligation to vote according to the demands of a handful of men who had until just recently been faithful Whigs, and who continued "to give quite unmistakable evidence of the lineage whence they sprung." He pledged his only allegiance to voting blocs pledged to prevent the extension of slavery, the divorce the government from all connection with it, and from all responsibility for its support or existence.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> *Cleveland True Democrat*, February 1, 1849; See also *The Cleveland Herald*, January 31, 1849.

<sup>138</sup> *Elyria Courier*, September 12, 1848.

<sup>139</sup> *The National Era*, March 22, 1849.

However, Oberlinites heaped praise upon Townsend for boldly doing the job they sent him to Columbus to do: act independently for the downtrodden, whatever the path and whatever the consequences. A meeting of the Lorain County Free Soilers resolved that Townsend had “met fully all the reasonable expectations of genuine Free-Soilers, and is still worthy of their confidence, and entitled to the plaudit, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’” They maintained that the true principles of Free Soil had been advanced more than ever before in the state, and that Townsend was entitled to a large share of the honor of forcing those principles upon an often unwilling legislature.<sup>140</sup>

In February, Oberlin’s African American students and residents celebrated their newly-acknowledged rights, and spent an entire day in praise, worship, and celebration of the events that had brought about the change. Their songs acknowledged the help of their white friends like Townsend, but were mainly offered to celebrate their own efforts in the repeal campaign. Six Black speakers spent the day developing the theme of self-improvement and what African Americans could accomplish through their own efforts at agitation.<sup>141</sup> They resolved that “Love to God, Love to each other, Purity in our, and Fidelity to our great cause, is the motto which we ought to and will urge upon ourselves and our people.”<sup>142</sup> It was Black Oberlinites and other Ohio African Americans, Frederick Douglass wrote, who were “stemming the current of the most raging floods, combating every opposition, resisting every obstacle until at length they have forced the dominant class in their own state to notice and respect their efforts.”<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> *The National Era*, May 3, 1849.

<sup>141</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 28, 1849.

<sup>142</sup> *Liberator*, March 2, 1849.

<sup>143</sup> *The North Star*, June 29, 1849.

Even after the repeal of most of the Black Laws in 1849, the prohibition on African American voting remained on the books. The Ohio Supreme Court ruled by a bare majority in 1842 that “all men, nearer white than black, or of the grade between the mulatto and the white” were entitled to vote as “white male citizens” under the 1802 constitution.<sup>144</sup> In Oberlin, African Americans may have voted long before this decision. William Howard Day reported that William P. Newman had been the first African American voter in Lorain County, implying that he had cast a ballot long before others could legally do so.<sup>145</sup> John Mercer Langston told an audience that in and around Oberlin, “we have gone so far as to say that anybody that will take responsibility of swearing that he is more than half-white, shall vote. We do not care how black he is.”<sup>146</sup> They did have at least one stubborn conservative Democrat, innkeeper Chauncey Wack, who patrolled the polling places to assure the “purity” of the vote. Yet in 1842, when John Ramsey, a self-emancipated giant of a man, attempted to vote, Wack challenged him, and election officials dutifully questioned the potential voter. When asked how white his father was, Ramsey replied “I should think, about as white as Mr. Wack.” By that point, they had gathered an audience who excitedly cheered Ramsey on, and Wack finally conceded, dejectedly saying “Let him vote, let him vote! I have nothing more to say.”<sup>147</sup>

But in other parts of Ohio, African Americans had considerably less support. Even those men who qualified under the 1842 court decision could be challenged before an election judge. State and national Black conventions proclaimed that a race-

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<sup>144</sup> See *The Revised Statutes of the State of Ohio, of a General Nature*, ed. Joseph R. Swan, Vol.I (Cincinnati, 1870), 41n2; Middleton, *The Black Laws of Ohio*, 149.

<sup>145</sup> (Cleveland) *Aliened American*, April 9, 1853.

<sup>146</sup> *Missouri Daily Democrat*, November 29, 1865.

<sup>147</sup> William E. Bigglestone, *They Stopped in Oberlin: Black Residents and Visitors During the Nineteenth Century* (Oberlin, 1981), 172; See also *Oberlin Evangelist*, March 14, 1849, for Oberlin’s defense against charges of voting misconduct. It was the duty of all township trustees to uphold their oath of office under the Ohio Constitution “as he understands it.” Though a blatant disregard of the constitutional restrictions on voting eligibility was inappropriate, it was clear that election officials in Oberlin were allowed considerable flexibility in their decisions.



blind suffrage law was their main goal. The leadership of the 1850 Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio included John and Charles Langston, William Howard Day, James Monroe Jones, and John M. Brown, all Oberlin alumni. In the words of Day, they had “one principle object—the securing for the colored man a vote in the State.”<sup>148</sup> Delegates voted that Day prepare and deliver an address to the Ohio Constitutional Convention that would convene in May.<sup>149</sup>

That convention had been called to revise the long-outdated document of 1802 and to make the state’s governance more “democratic” in nature. Despite the fact that the convention’s majority were conservative Democrats, the state Colored Convention believed that “by vigorous and energetic action,” they could induce the delegates to alter the constitution to give all citizens, without discrimination, “this heaven bestowed and inalienable right” to vote.<sup>150</sup> However, similar revisions of the state constitutions of Pennsylvania and New York had resulted in either the complete disfranchisement of their African American populations or severely restricted suffrage. In neighboring Illinois, constitutional restructuring had resulted in an outright ban on African American immigration.<sup>151</sup> On the other hand, Ohio had just repealed the majority of its Black Laws, and as a result of abolitionist agitation and controversy that surrounded the resolution of the Mexican War, the issue of slavery and racial oppression was again squarely before the eyes of Ohioans. It seemed to those who had the most to gain and lose, the state’s free African Americans, that the occasion was pregnant with possibilities, both good and evil. The Ohio convention resolved that “it is the duty of every colored man, to do every thing in his power, to

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<sup>148</sup> “Minutes of the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio, Convened at Columbus, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup>, 1850,” in Foner and Walker, *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions*, 243.

<sup>149</sup> “State Convention of Colored Citizens...1850,” 246.

<sup>150</sup> *ibid.*, 252; Steven H. Steinglass and Gino J. Scarselli, *The Ohio State Constitution: A Reference Guide* (Westport, 2004), 20.

<sup>151</sup> See William Cheek and Aimee Lee Cheek, *John Mercer Langston and the Fight for Black Freedom* (Urbana, 1989), 152.

secure to himself and brethren, their political rights...we will *fight and fight ever* until these privileges are *granted* to us.”<sup>152</sup>

John Mercer Langston and William Howard Day were also appointed to the Executive Committee of a newly formed “Ohio Colored American League,” the object of which was to be “the liberation of the slave and the elevation of the colored American, half-free.” Oberlin had already formed a similar organization in anticipation of the national convention “to advocate *the right of the colored man to vote*.” They employed Day as their agent, and he informed the national body that, at least as far as he was concerned, the direction of both Colored American Leagues would follow the direction of the Oberlin reformers. The Leagues concentrated on supplying a cadre of lecturers across the state to circulate petitions to be laid before Constitutional Convention delegates and to speak out on the subjects of equal rights and the voting franchise for all Ohioans, regardless of color.<sup>153</sup> Agents would be appointed to canvass the state, lecturing to all those who would listen, and making a special attempt to reach those who would not. Thus, as John L. Watson told the convention, “If they do take our rights from us, they shall take our rights from us in our presence.”<sup>154</sup>

The eyes of all Ohio African Americans were on Columbus when the Constitutional Convention convened on May 6, 1850. Immediately, it seemed as if the worst fears of Black reformers would come to pass. Once the convention was organized and brought to order, the first substantive matter of business was the presentation by Benjamin Stanton of Logan County of a memorial asking the convention to authorize an act that provided for the extradition of all African

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<sup>152</sup> “State Convention of Colored Citizens...1850,” 251.

<sup>153</sup> *ibid.*, 248-249, 251-252; *Cleveland True Democrat*, December 24, 1849.

<sup>154</sup> “State Convention of Colored Citizens...1850,” 252.

Americans from the state of Ohio.<sup>155</sup> Over the course of the nearly year-long convention that followed, petitions signed by over a thousand Ohioans were presented in opposition to African American enfranchisement, demanding that African Americans be barred from entering the state, and moving that those African Americans currently living in the state be expelled.<sup>156</sup>

As the Constitutional Convention stretched on, the Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio held its annual meeting in January in the same city. John and Charles Langston served together on the Executive Committee that asked the Constitutional Convention to “give every citizen, irrespective of color, a right to say at the ballot box who shall make and execute the law by which he is governed.”<sup>157</sup> In a direct appeal to the lawmakers at the convention, Day, Charles Langston, and Charles Yancey offered a veritable resume of qualifications upon which African Americans were entitled to full citizenship. They cited African American participation in every American war, legal opinions by scholars as prestigious as Fortesque, Coke, and Blackstone, as well as the United States Constitution and Declaration of Independence. Moreover, they marshaled statistics to show that African Americans gladly paid more than their fair share of taxes in support of a government that considered them less than full men. “In your hands,” they humbly wrote to the delegates, “our destiny is placed. To you, therefore, we appeal. We look to you.”<sup>158</sup>

The all-white Constitutional Convention, however, would only disappoint their hopeful African American counterparts. When Norton Townsend attempted to introduce a memorial written by Day, requesting the franchise be extended to all persons regardless of color it was immediately challenged by William Sawyer of

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<sup>155</sup> *Report on the Debates and Proceedings of the Convention for the Revision of the Constitution, of the State of Ohio, 1850-51*, Vol.I (Columbus, 1851), 28.

<sup>156</sup> See Quillin, *The Color Line in Ohio*, 61.

<sup>157</sup> “State Convention of Colored Citizens...1850,” 266.

<sup>158</sup> *ibid.*, 269-272.

Auglaize County. Sawyer flatly demanded to know if that particular petition was one “from colored people.” Townsend replied that the petition was signed by only one individual, who was a legal citizen of the state. “As to the person’s color,” Townsend remarked, “he was very nearly white, having less black blood in him than a mulatto.” Regardless, Sawyer declared that he wanted give the convention advance notice that he would object to all similar petitions which might be presented. His reasoning was suggested by his contention that “he objected to this petition, more especially than any other.”<sup>159</sup>

Townsend had not imagined such vehement opposition would be offered to the mere *reception* of his constituent’s petition. He defended Day as one who “has what is called African blood in his veins, and is therefore identified in feeling with the oppressed colored people of this State,” but who was also entitled to the right of suffrage and all the rights and privileges of citizenship under the then-present constitution as interpreted by the state Supreme Court. Day, he said, was a man who had worked hard to elect him as a delegate to the convention, as well as someone who possessed the same right to be heard as the constituents of any other delegate. Moreover, Townsend asserted that Day, “colored though he be,” was well educated and as much of a gentleman as any man who opposed the reception of his petition. “I venture to say, also” he argued, “that if anyone here wished to discuss the propriety of granting the prayer of this memorial, the gentleman from whom it emanated will be ready to meet them anywhere, and I know he will be found abundantly able to sustain himself.”<sup>160</sup>

Despite the cold reception of Day’s appeal, the number of petitions for equal rights for all Ohioans actually outnumbered those who would seek to abrogate African

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<sup>159</sup> *Debates and Proceedings... 1850-51*, I: 458.

<sup>160</sup> *ibid.*

Americans' rights.<sup>161</sup> Unfortunately for Black Ohioans, however, their pleas mostly fell upon deaf ears. It was the delegates, not the petitioners, who would decide their ultimate fate. Though many conservatives supported the propositions, the eight petitions against African American immigration and the five for extradition were not adopted by the convention. Ultimately, African Americans were constitutionally barred for the first time from participation in the state militia, yet provisions for white-only public schooling were dropped, leaving the final decision to be made by the legislature at a later date.<sup>162</sup>

With regards to African American enfranchisement, there were three petitions presented in favor and three against. The Committee on the elective franchise offered their report in December, and their draft conferred the vote on "white male citizens" only.<sup>163</sup> Again, Norton Townsend stood up as "the champion of negro rights" in this battle, and objected to the use of the qualifier "white." "Humanity," Townsend argued, "does not consist in the color of the hair, or eyes, or skin, or where a person may have been born, or what his origin or capacity—these peculiarities may be changed indefinitely, but a man is a man for all that."<sup>164</sup> He noted that in Oberlin, there was less prejudice, not because they did not know any African Americans, but because they did.<sup>165</sup> Still, Townsend included even himself among the members of a privileged racial class, and noted one particular right that all white Ohioans possessed: "'the right of the strongest,' a right always recognized, I believe, among robbers, but not usually recognized among honest men."<sup>166</sup> Despite the efforts of Townsend and

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<sup>161</sup> Quillin, *The Color Line in Ohio*, 61.

<sup>162</sup> Their participation had been barred earlier by legislative statute. See *Report on the Debates and Proceedings of the Convention for the Revision of the Constitution, of the State of Ohio, 1850-51*, Vol.II (Columbus, 1851), 346, 699; Quillin, *The Color Line in Ohio*, 76, 85.

<sup>163</sup> *Debates and Proceedings... 1850-51*, II: 8, Quillin, *The Color Line in Ohio*, 76-77.

<sup>164</sup> *Report on the Debates and Proceedings of the Convention for the Revision of the Constitution, of the State of Ohio, 1850-51*, Vol.II (Columbus, 1851), 552-552; Quillin, *The Color Line in Ohio*, 77-78.

<sup>165</sup> Blue and McCormick, "Norton S. Townshend," 149-150.

<sup>166</sup> *Report on the Debates and Proceedings of the Convention for the Revision of the Constitution, of the State of Ohio, 1850-51*, Vol.II (Columbus, 1851), 552-552; Quillin, *The Color Line in Ohio*, 77-78.

some other Northern Ohio delegates, the convention decided overwhelmingly by a vote of seventy five to thirteen to deny the ballot to everyone but white men.<sup>167</sup>

Though the Constitutional Convention had not been a complete disaster for Ohio African Americans, the debates from 1850 to 1851 had been incredibly disheartening to those who were following the deliberations. Both federal and state lawmakers seemed committed to keeping all Blacks in thrall. Still, at the end of their own deliberations in 1850, Ohio's steadfastly patriotic African Americans joined together in a resounding rendition of a song written by Oberlin alum Joshua McCarter Simpson, "Liberia is not the place for me."<sup>168</sup>

Defeatism would accomplish nothing; there were even greater battles to be fought, and soon. "A mountain of Prejudice is to be surmounted," John Mercer Langston told one audience, "A Herculean task is before us."<sup>169</sup> Indeed, other abolitionists from Oberlin sensed a great struggle in the immediate future. "The time is plainly coming, and is even now at the door" the editor of the *Oberlin Evangelist* declared, "when the great question is to be tried, and settled." "Either slavery is soon to be riveted on this nation, while the nation shall stand," the editor wrote, "or it is to stand rebuked and chained under the withering eye and in the giant grasp of the genius of Freedom...The time for ill-starred compromises is past and gone, we trust forever."<sup>170</sup>

Before Ohio's equally ill-starred Constitutional Convention had even adjourned, the *Evangelist's* prediction seemed to have partially come true. The time for compromise, however, seemed to remain very much in the present. African Americans from Oberlin, Ohio—all of the supposedly Free States even—faced a

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<sup>167</sup> *Debates and Proceedings... 1850-51*, II: 556-560; Quillin, *The Color Line in Ohio*, 81.

<sup>168</sup> "State Convention of Colored Citizens... 1850," 259.

<sup>169</sup> Langston, quoted in Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 156.

<sup>170</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, January 6, 1847.

threat even more grave than the denial of their right to vote. With the passage of the infamous Compromise of 1850 and its Fugitive Slave Law, the United States of America suddenly became one massive slave territory. Langston was right to call the task before abolitionists at the turn of the decade “Herculean,” yet he and his colleagues would not rest while they remained “half-free” in the North and a single slave remained in bonds in the South. As the Slave Power attempted to tighten its grip over the nation in the 1850, Oberlin abolitionists would be there to fight them at every step.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *“We must watch and improve this tide”: Oberlin Confronts the Slave Power, 1850-1858*

The decade of the 1850s was a period both pregnant with possibilities for abolitionist advancement and full of crushing setbacks to their cause at the hands of the Slave Power. No abolitionist victory seemed secure before an election, Act of Congress, or judicial decision forced a reevaluation of their tactics and strategies. However, reformers in Oberlin viewed the events of the decade as a triumphant march towards emancipation, believing, in the words of an Oberlin student newspaper, that the course of truth “is ever accumulative of power,” and the moral force of abolitionist gains could never be beaten into submission.<sup>1</sup> Oberlin—its residents, students, faculty, and alumni—would be among the vanguard of reformers shepherding the constantly growing antislavery sentiment into a popular force that would shake the institution of slavery to its roots. As Oberlin’s abolitionist musician Joshua McCarty Simpson wrote in his popular 1852 songbook *The Emancipation Car*:

The Tyrant-host is great and strong;  
But ah, their reign will not be long...  
Stand up, stand up my boys,  
The battle field is ours:  
Fight on, Fight on, all hearts resolved,  
To break the Tyrant’s power.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Oberlin Students’ Monthly*, Vol.1, 1858, RG 30/24, Robert S. Fletcher papers (hereafter FP), Box 18, Folder 11, Oberlin College Archives (hereafter OCA).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in William Osborne, *Music in Ohio* (Kent, 2004), 386.



***“THE PALLADIUM OF OUR LIBERTIES”***

In September of 1850, John Mercer Langston and Charles Langston addressed a cheerless letter to Senator Salmon P. Chase. As they wrote, the Ohio Constitutional Convention was presenting them and other African Americans with one disappointment after another, and their faith in the United States was wearing thin. They perceived Chase as a shrewd politician, a man with a sensitive finger on the pulse of the populace. Rumors had been circulating in Oberlin and elsewhere regarding another Congressional compromise measure over the slavery question, and the Langston brothers were pessimistic.<sup>3</sup> They asked Chase if he thought the public sentiment of the country was such as would completely preclude the successful attainment of their political rights any vestige of civil or social equality. They pled for his advice regarding the best course to pursue, and even wondered whether the federal government might allow disfranchised African Americans a land grant in the Territories where they might actually peaceably settle and enjoy the rights already held by a majority of Americans. Should they abandon the land of their birth, they wondered, or remain until “the great principles on which our Government was founded shall exist in practice as well as in theory?”<sup>4</sup>

By the time the Langstons posted their letter, Congress had already passed several of the component parts of the Compromise of 1850, the pet creation of Henry Clay meant to offer a final solution to the slavery problem in the United States. The first measures bailed out a debt-ridden Texas in return for the transfer of a large territory to the federal government, organized the Territories of New Mexico and Utah (with the key provision that slavery be allowed or banned based on local option), and

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<sup>3</sup> See Joshua Giddings to Henry Cowles, February 7, 1850, RG 30/27, Henry Cowles papers, Box 3, OCA.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Langston and John Mercer Langston to Salmon P. Chase, September 12, 1850, Salmon P. Chase papers, Library of Congress, microfilm roll 8.

admitted California as a free state. Though the Compromise also banned the slave trade in the District of Columbia, its fourth provision, passed just six days after the Langstons' letter to Chase, would prove itself one of the most controversial laws ever passed by the United States government.



**Illustration 8.1: John Mercer Langston**  
(from Langston, *Freedom and Citizenship* (1883))

Abolitionists considered the Compromise's Fugitive Slave Law the most odious edict to ever disgrace the federal statute book. Of all the measures, it was the greatest concession to the secession-happy slave states, meant to bolster the largely

unenforced fugitive clause of 1793.<sup>5</sup> This 1850 law shifted responsibility for the recapture of alleged fugitive slaves from the states to the federal government. Now, in any state of the Union, a slaveholder's testimony as to the identity of his absconded slave was, by law, to be taken as indisputable fact by federal marshals or commissioners. A man or woman captured under the Act had no right to give testimony in his or her behalf, no right to a trial by jury, and was likewise barred from the right of *habeas corpus*.<sup>6</sup> Commissioners who remanded a "fugitive" back to slavery received ten dollars for their efforts, while those who upheld the freedom of the accused inexplicably earned but five. Moreover, all bystanders were subject to being deputized by marshals or conscripted into a "*posse comitatus*" to aid in the capture of alleged runaways. Anyone found guilty of refusing such service or acting in any way to frustrate the execution of the law could face imprisonment for up to six months and a fine of as much as one thousand dollars.<sup>7</sup>

John Langston described the operations of the law in more personal terms. Langston had never been a slave, but he realized that if he or others like him were kidnapped with no white witnesses to vouch for their freedom, they risked actually being enslaved on the word of someone who didn't even have to be present. The Fugitive Act, he thundered to a large African American audience, "strips man of his manhood and liberty upon an *ex-parte* trial...declares that the decision of the commissioner, the lowest judicial officer known to the law, upon the matter of personal liberty—the gravest subject that can be submitted to any tribunal, shall be

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<sup>5</sup> This was an act made it a federal crime to assist an escaping slave and established a legal mechanism by which alleged fugitives could be seized.

<sup>6</sup> *Habeas Corpus* is a legal action, guaranteed by the U.S. States Constitution, that protects citizens from unlawful seizure and detention by requiring a court to address the legitimacy of a detainee's custody. Some Northern states passed laws guaranteeing habeas corpus in the wake of the Fugitive Act of 1850. See Thomas D. Morris, *Free Men All: The Personal Liberty Laws of the North, 1780-1861* (Baltimore, 1974), 130-201.

<sup>7</sup> See John Kaminski, *A Necessary Evil?: Slavery and the Debate Over the Constitution* (New York, 1995), 238-239; David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York, 1976), 90-120.

final and conclusive.” Mostly, however, Langston protested that the law struck down “all the great bulwarks of Liberty” since it “kills alike, the true spirit of the American Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the palladium of our liberties.”<sup>8</sup>

Another African American Oberlin alumnus, William Newman, believed that the Bill had been inspired by the direct influence of “his Satanic majesty” and was “the climax of his infernal wickedness.” He suggested to his friend Frederick Douglass that the world had not fully grasped what the true of the American government had been to that point, but that the passage of the Fugitive Law had made it abundantly clear that many Congressmen had been rendered “despicable in the eyes of the good, and contemptible in the just opinion of the bad.” In seeking to please a handful of tyrants, lawmakers had lost the favor of everyone. “In view of such facts,” he concluded, “it is my candid conviction that the record of the infernal regions can exhibit no blacker deeds than the American archives, and the accursed Fugitive Slave Bill.”<sup>9</sup>

Across the North, the negative reaction among whites was also strong. For the first time, *all* Northerners risked a patent and often-unwilling complicity in enslaving fellow men and women, not to mention fines and imprisonment if they balked at helping a Southern aristocrat reclaim his alleged human property. It seemed that the federal government had not only openly declared its commitment to slave hunting, but also commanded all its citizens to join the business as well.<sup>10</sup> A September meeting of outraged Oberlinites denounced the Act as “belonging to a dark age and a

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<sup>8</sup> “Minutes of the State Convention, of the Colored Citizens of Ohio, Convened at Columbus, Jan. 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, 1851,” in *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865*, Vol.I, ed. Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker (Philadelphia, 1979), 260.

<sup>9</sup> William P. Newman to Frederick Douglass, October 1, 1850, in *The North Star*, October 24, 1850.

<sup>10</sup> As David Potter notes, to appreciate the full impact of the law, one must consider that it was not just a law to capture slaves in the act of running away, but also a device for reclaiming slaves who had absconded in years past. There was no statute of limitations in the Fugitive Slave Law, and even if an African American had lived in freedom for many years, as a large portion of northern African Americans had, the law guaranteed his or her former owner both possession of their person and assistance in claiming the former bondsman. See Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 131-132.

tyrannical government” and lamented the appearance that barbarism and oppression had triumphed over the spirit of liberty and progress. Their meeting was but one of many across the Free States that blasted the pretensions of the Slave Power. Though the Oberlin gathering stopped short of espousing outright separation from the offending states, they did admit that “a union which brings us under the law of slavery, and enjoins upon us the loathsome work of slave-catching” was not counted “among our precious things.”<sup>11</sup>

Oberlin community patriarch John Keep rightly read the gauge of Northern public opinion. He wrote to Charles Finney in November urging him to immediately return to Oberlin from a revival sojourn in England to help guide the rising sentiment against the Fugitive Act towards abolitionist grounds. The “diabolical legislation,” Keep wrote, had greatly aroused the nation, and he reported to Finney that sympathy for African Americans in the North was at a new high. The law seemed to be backfiring on its supporters, and was creating “new interest, & great important tendencies towards Oberlin.” Keep advised Finney that “we must watch and improve this tide.”<sup>12</sup> Keep well understood that as a powerful symbol of abolitionism, many eyes across the country would be upon the Oberlin community to observe their response to the passage of the legislation and follow their example in opposing it.

The Oberlin community began by affirming and strengthening its commitment to those already among them who risked re-enslavement at the hands of federal marshals. The September Oberlin meeting solemnly insisted that “while our fugitive brother remains in our midst, we will stand by him to the last, to protect him by all justifiable means in our power.”<sup>13</sup> A similarly indignant meeting of African

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<sup>11</sup> William P. Newman to Frederick Douglass, October 1, 1850, in *The North Star*, October 24, 1850.

<sup>12</sup> John Keep to Charles Grandison Finney, November 18, 1850, Charles Grandison Finney papers, Microfilm, OCA.

<sup>13</sup> *The North Star*, October 24, 1850.

Americans in Columbus that same month listened as Charles Langston urged slaves to continue to flee for the “land of liberty,” pledged his support and that of every Northern African American for their protection, and warned them to be constantly prepared to defend their newly-won freedom. That meeting also appointed a five man vigilance committee to protect “fugitives” from seizure by slaveholders or their agents.<sup>14</sup> Nearly all of Oberlin’s population was so zealously guardful of their African American neighbors that no such dedicated committee was necessary there; almost all Oberlinites were pledged to the protection and benefit of one another.<sup>15</sup>

Still, across Ohio and the North, some free African Americans, whether “fugitives” from slavery or not, began an exodus to locations where the iniquitous Fugitive Law had no force. Untold numbers moved their families to other locations in the United States (like Oberlin) where they felt more secure.<sup>16</sup> Oberlin’s African American population, the majority of which would be considered “fugitive slaves,” swelled by nearly 300 percent between 1850 and 1860, as Blacks who felt vulnerable to slave hunters flocked to what they considered the safest location in the United States (and, conveniently, a place only ten miles from Lake Erie’s access to Canada).<sup>17</sup> According to some historians, between fifteen and twenty thousand African

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<sup>14</sup> *Cleveland True Democrat*, September 30, 1850.

<sup>15</sup> See Charles Grandison Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*, ed. Garth M. Roselle and Richard A.G. DuPuis (Grand Rapids, 1989), 412-413; *New York Evangelist*, March 27, 1841; *Oberliniana: A Jubilee Volume of Semi-Historical Anecdotes Connected with the Past and Present of Oberlin College*, ed. A.L. Shumway and C. DeW. Brower, 30-31; *Norwalk Experiment*, March 24, 1841; *Liberator*, March 2, 1849. See also Chapter 9, below, pp. 409-446.

<sup>16</sup> James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Slavery and the Making of America* (New York, 2004), 155; William Cheek and Aimee Lee Cheek, *John Mercer Langston and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1829-1865* (Urbana, 1989), 172.

<sup>17</sup> John Mercer Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol; or, The First and Only Negro Representative in Congress from the Old Dominion* (Hartford, 1894), 101-102; See 1850 and 1860 Censuses, Russia Township, Electronic Oberlin Group, <http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/HistoricalDocuments.html> (accessed July 28, 2009); William Cox Cochrane, *The Western Reserve and the Fugitive Slave Law: A Prelude to Civil War* (Cleveland, 1920), 119. Census statistics include African Americans listed as “black” or “mulatto.” In 1850, there were 92 residents listed as “mulatto,” and 77 as “black.” In 1860, there were 353 “mulatto” residents and 124 “black.”

Americans actually left their home country for British Canada between the passage of the Fugitive Act and 1860.<sup>18</sup> Oberlin alum William Newman was one who thought it best to leave the sullied United States for Canada. He asked Frederick Douglass just two weeks after the Act's passage if the Devil himself should not "*rent out hell*" and to fill the void left by refugees like himself "and rival, if possible, President Fillmore and his political followers!"<sup>19</sup>

African American leaders used the forum of the 1851 Convention of Colored Citizens of Ohio to continue their critique of the legislation. John Langston was the first to address the convention on the issue, and called the Fugitive Slave Law the "abomination of all abominations." The public outcry across the Free States was to be expected, he said, if one assumed that mankind had not yet been entirely divested of its humanity. Moreover, the enactment possessed "neither the form nor the essence of true law," and was nothing more than "a hideous deformity in the *garb* of law."<sup>20</sup>

The discussion of the unconstitutionality of the fugitive law opened up another important debate among the delegates when H. Ford Douglass of Cleveland attempted to put the convention on record as affirming the Constitution as a proslavery document under which African Americans could not consistently vote. Oberlin alumnus John M. Brown quickly moved to indefinitely postpone Douglass' resolution, and former classmates William Howard Day and Charles Langston arose to support him take issue with Douglass' logic.<sup>21</sup> Both Day and Langston acknowledged that the Constitution, as it had been recently constructed by lawmakers and federal courts, *did* sanction slavery as well as the return of self-emancipated men and women to bondage.

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<sup>18</sup> Horton and Horton, *Slavery and the Making of America*, 155; Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 172.

<sup>19</sup> William P. Newman to Frederick Douglass, October 1, 1850, in *The North Star*, October 24, 1850.

<sup>20</sup> "Minutes of the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio...1851," 259-260.

<sup>21</sup> Brown would go on to become a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal church in the South after the Civil War. See William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive, and Rising* (Cleveland, 1887), 1113-1118.

However, as they argued, it was not that peculiar construction under which they voted. Day likened the Constitution to the Bible, another document that had commonly been used to uphold slavery. Should they also discard the Bible, he asked, or should they rather “discard the false opinions of mistaken men, in regard to it?” For Day, “If [the Constitution] says it was framed to ‘establish justice,’ it, of course, is opposed to injustice. If it says plainly that no person shall be deprived of life, *liberty*, or property without due process of law, I suppose it means it, and I shall avail myself of the benefit of it.” As an oppressed African American in the North, and especially as a representative of the millions of slaves in the South, Day held every instrument precious that guaranteed him liberty and vowed to continue his appeal to the American people for the rights thus guaranteed.<sup>22</sup>



**Illustration 8.2: William Howard Day**  
(From Wheeler, *The Varick Family* (1906))

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<sup>22</sup> “Minutes of the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio...1851,” 261-263; See also Sanford Levinson, *Constitutional Faith* (Princeton, 1989), 38-39. Douglass’ motion was defeated 28-2.



In February of 1851, Day and the Langston brothers were among a delegation of Ohio African Americans who attempted to thus expand their liberties at an important and unprecedented meeting with Ohio's Democratic Governor Reuben Wood. The group hoped to extract a written endorsement from the Governor in favor of African American enfranchisement to be presented to the ongoing state Constitutional Convention.<sup>23</sup> Wood expressed a surprised and condescending delight that African Americans were showing an interest in the political machinations of the state, and voiced some vague concern for "the welfare of the colored." The majority of his reply was a disappointment to the hopeful Black men and other Ohio abolitionists who later called it a "shuffling, evasive, cowardly answer" to a sincere appeal.<sup>24</sup>

John Langston voiced his determined frustration to an African American audience not long thereafter. The chronic short-sightedness of the self-appointed gatekeepers of citizenship was obstructing the recognition of African American rights. It seemed clear to him that Black advancement would ultimately have to be through their own efforts, with the help of their closest allies. "We struggle against opinions," he declared, and reminded his listeners that "Our warfare lies in the field of thought. Glorious struggle! Godlike warfare!" He realized that many Americans despised their Black neighbors because of what they viewed as a long history of submissiveness, yet Langston pledged "before the world and in the face of Heaven" to "manfully" continue the struggle for advancement in civil and social life.<sup>25</sup> The time for strictly moral appeals to those in power had long since passed.

Langston decided to attack the flawed American legal system from within. Though refused admission into any law school on account of his race, on the

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<sup>23</sup> *Liberator*, February 14, 1851.

<sup>24</sup> *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, February 22, 1851; *Liberator*, February 14, 1851.

<sup>25</sup> "Minutes of the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio...1851," 265.

recommendation of Professor John Morgan, he began theological study at Oberlin in 1851 as the best available course for a young Black man to train for a legal career.<sup>26</sup> Back in the familiar role as an Oberlin student, Langston's radical spark reinvigorated his colleagues. He was elected secretary of the Theological Literary Society in his first year. There, he and other members assiduously debated the pressing issues of the day, including the various fine points of the Fugitive Slave Law, as well as the related but not-so-fine question "Ought Daniel Webster be Hung?"<sup>27</sup> In September, Langston was elected chairman of the new Oberlin Young Men's Anti-Slavery Society, open to students, faculty, and town residents and dedicated solely to "the social and moral elevation of the colored race."<sup>28</sup> At the society's organization, Langston was sent out as its student agent in charge of arousing support among the African American population for their educational welfare.<sup>29</sup>

By the time the 1852 Convention of Colored Freemen of Ohio met in Cincinnati in January, the outrage over the Fugitive Law and the emphasis on African American self-reliance had come to a head. Charles Langston served on the Business Committee that, in the first resolution of the convention, declared that "colored people can do more to elevate themselves and break down the illiberal prejudice, which bears upon them as a millstone to blight their prospects, by an honest truthful effort, than can, or will be done, by any or all other agencies combined."<sup>30</sup> A September meeting of African American abolitionists in Cleveland, including Oberlin notables Sabram

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<sup>26</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 111-113. This theme would be raised again in a speech of Charles Langston in 1859. See Chapter 10, below, 451-454.

<sup>27</sup> Theological Society Records, May 15, 1850, RG 30/24, FP, Box 13, Folder 21, OCA. Daniel Webster was a senator from Massachusetts who was one of the most outspoken advocates of the Compromise of 1850.

<sup>28</sup> Records of the Young Men's Anti-Slavery Society, September 14, 1851, RG 19/3/6, Box 3, OCA. Membership in the O.Y.M.A.S.S. was open to "Any person who is *practically* opposed to slavery."

<sup>29</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 141.

<sup>30</sup> "Proceedings of the Convention of the Colored Freemen of Ohio, Held in Cincinnati, January 14, 15, 16, 17 and 19, 1852," in *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865*, Vol.I, ed. Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker (Philadelphia, 1979), 276.

Cox, William Howard Day, and John Mercer Langston in various leadership roles, stepped up the forcefulness of their rhetoric and resolved that the only way to mitigate the iniquities of the Fugitive Law was for everyone, “singly and collectively,” to enforce their right to liberty, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, regardless of means employed, when threatened with enslavement. Moreover, in an explicit turn away from the pacific roots of white antislavery towards the increasingly aggressive rhetoric of African American abolitionist leaders, the convention resolved to “in no case...deal more mildly with the robber of body, than with the highwayman or the assassin.”<sup>31</sup>

Though Sojourner Truth, who was present at the meeting, tearfully urged the delegates to continue on the path of “peace and forbearance,” it was clear that many Ohio African Americans had already taken up as their own Patrick Henry’s revolutionary motto “Give me Liberty or give me Death.”<sup>32</sup> It was William Newman who had quoted the patriot leader while declaring it his intention to kill “any so-called man” who attempted to enslave him or his family. To do that, in defense of personal liberty, would be to Newman an act of the highest virtue. White Americans, he concluded, would show themselves to be hypocrites if they refused to agree with him that “Thrice armed is he who hath his quarrel just.”<sup>33</sup> At the 1851 Colored Convention, Charles Langston had called “on every slave, from Maryland to Texas, to arise and assert their *liberties*, and cut their masters’ throats if they attempt again to reduce them to slavery.”<sup>34</sup> The use of force was no longer an abstract philosophical debate among abolitionists, especially African Americans, who increasingly had little

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<sup>31</sup> *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, October 1, 1852.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*; William P. Newman to Frederick Douglass, October 1, 1850, in *The North Star*, October 24, 1850; See also Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth’s America* (Urbana, 2009), 246.

<sup>33</sup> William P. Newman to Frederick Douglass, October 1, 1850, in *The North Star*, October 24, 1850.

<sup>34</sup> “Minutes of the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio...1851,” 263.

patience with reformers who recommended non-resistance to those who were denied the protection of equitable laws.<sup>35</sup>

### ***OBERLIN AND THE FREE DEMOCRACY***

The presidential election of 1852 was the first since the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, and the notorious measure was at the heart of the campaign. Democrats pledged to uphold the Fugitive Law and to strenuously oppose “all efforts of the Abolitionists or others, made to induce Congress to interfere with questions of slavery.” Whigs endorsed all parts of the Compromise of 1850 “as a settlement in principle and substance of the dangerous and exciting questions which they embrace,” and pledged to maintain them, and insist upon their strict enforcement. Like the Democrats, they deprecated all further agitation of the slavery question “thus settled” as dangerous to the nation’s peace.<sup>36</sup> Finney’s précis in August of the parties’ positions exposed their unmistakable mutual foundation: “Both parties,” he preached, “concede to the South all they ask.”<sup>37</sup>

When the news that the national Democratic Party had nominated Franklin Pierce for the presidency reached Oberlin in June, the small handful of local Democrats called together an impromptu ratification meeting. Though a New Hampshire man, Pierce was an outspoken anti-abolitionist, and his support of the Fugitive Act and belief that the Compromise was the final solution to the slavery problem encouraged the belief by some of his supporters that he was “as reliable as

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<sup>35</sup> David Ruggles, quoted in Leslie M. Alexander, *African Or American?: Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784-1861* (Urbana, 2008), 97.

<sup>36</sup> James Mack Henry Frederick, *National Party Platforms of the United States Presidential Candidates, Electoral and Popular Votes* (Akron, 1896), 20-22.

<sup>37</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 18, 1852.

[John C.] Calhoun himself” on the slavery issue.<sup>38</sup> However, a much larger group of Oberlinites joined the meeting to mock the Democratic candidate and shout Free Soil slogans whenever they could.<sup>39</sup>

Also included in the crowd was a group of young African Americans, sarcastically described by an observer from Cleveland as being “of *very* Democratic principles.” As the first politician took the stump to praise the prospect of a President Pierce, his words were drowned out by calls from the crowd demanding that John Langston step out of the crowd to offer some remarks. Langston complied, and fit many of his statements to the occasion of the rally—by sharply attacking the Democratic Party. Moreover, he also vented his frustration with the Whigs and their candidate, Mexican War hero Winfield Scott, who had done little to differentiate themselves from the rabidly proslavery Democracy. After Langston’s speech concluded to loud cheers, the meeting adjourned with three groans for the Democratic ticket.<sup>40</sup>

The former Free Soil Party, newly renamed the Free Democracy, held their August nominating convention in Pittsburgh. John Hale of New Hampshire was selected as the party’s presidential candidate to run on a ticket with the radical George Julian of Indiana. The tone of the convention seemed to be set early by the Ohioans, as Buckeye delegates paraded around the hall with a banner reading “NO COMPROMISE WITH SLAVEHOLDERS OR DOUGHFACES,” a jab at the backsliding Barnburners of 1848.<sup>41</sup> Though they would miss the numbers Van Buren’s supporters had brought the party, the Free Democrats used the defection to

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<sup>38</sup> Mississippian Albert G. Brown, quoted in James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York, 1988), 118. South Carolinian John Caldwell Calhoun was one of the most outspoken proslavery politicians of the antebellum era.

<sup>39</sup> Cleveland *True Democrat*, June 19, 1852.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York, 2005), 663.

radicalize their platform. They unabashedly denounced slavery as “a sin against God and a crime against man,” and dropped their earlier denial of Congressional power to interfere with slavery where it existed. Delegates excoriated the Fugitive Slave Law and its supporters, called for the official recognition of the Black Republic of Haiti, and, in “a mighty protest against the absurd, unnatural, and wicked prejudice that exists so universally against the man of color,” selected Frederick Douglass as an officer of the convention.<sup>42</sup> Though they noted the party’s shortcomings, even the Garrisonian Western Anti-Slavery Society declared that the convention had taken a “bold and defiant” position against the Slave Power.<sup>43</sup>

Finney played an important role in the development of the Free Democratic platform, and upon his return to Oberlin, his account of the convention thrilled eager listeners.<sup>44</sup> His first sermon published after the convention was a scathing attack on slavery, its supporters, the Fugitive Bill, and the hopelessly proslavery Whig and Democratic Parties.<sup>45</sup> Oberlinites also had the opportunity to hear from other delegates on their return trips from Pittsburgh, including Douglass, Gerrit Smith, and their former professor Amasa Walker, now Secretary of State of Massachusetts.<sup>46</sup> John Langston, as chairman of the Oberlin Young Men’s Anti-Slavery Society, welcomed Salmon Chase and candidate John Hale himself to Oberlin in October for a series of lively and well-received campaign speeches.<sup>47</sup>

The Oberlin community campaigned hard that fall for Hale as well as town favorite Norton Townsend, who had been nominated for a seat in Congress. Black

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<sup>42</sup> *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, August 20, 1852; *The National Era*, August 26, October 21, 1852.

<sup>43</sup> “Tenth Annual Report of the Western Anti-Slavery Society,” Western Anti-Slavery Society Records, Vols. 6-7, microfilm, Western Reserve Historical Society.

<sup>44</sup> *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, August 20, 1852.

<sup>45</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 18, 1852.

<sup>46</sup> Francis A. Walker, *Memoir of Hon. Amasa Walker, LL.D.* (Boston, 1888), 10; Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 208.

<sup>47</sup> Records of the Young Men’s Anti-Slavery Society, October 1, 1852, RG 19/3/6, Box 3, OCA; *The National Era*, October 14, 1852.

Oberlinites were especially active on the stump, and as the events of one such speech in French Creek, Ohio, showed, the Oberlin name still bore a particular connotation, especially because of the new African American vanguard that carried it. John Langston was one of three speakers scheduled to speak on behalf of the Free Democracy and Townsend. The first two speakers, both white, struggled through their addresses while many listeners hostile to their speeches shouted provocative insults and incendiary questions. In fact, the second man could not make it to the conclusion of his remarks because of an insistent local Democrat in front repeatedly shouting the question “Are you in favor of *nigger* social equality?” The speaker’s obvious discomfort and hesitation to respond fed the audience’s hostility, and their storm of hand clapping, foot stomping, and hissing made his continuance impossible.<sup>48</sup>

Langston would not be so intimidated. He quickly arose and repeated the heckler’s question, answered it in the affirmative, and declared that “it was only the enemy of human rights” who would object so vehemently to “equal freedom.” Stymied, the critic resorted to what Langston would later remember as the most reliable of insults in antebellum Ohio—he screamed “You learned that at Oberlin!” “You learned another thing at Oberlin!” the man went on, “You learned to walk with white women there!” Langston, grinning in the affirmative, walked to the very edge of the platform, right up to the heckler, and replied that “If you have in your family, any good-looking, intelligent, refined sisters, you would do your family a special service by introducing me to them at once.” Stung, the critic was shouted back to his seat by the newly supportive audience, one of whom shouted “Joe Ladd, you d—d fool sit down! That darkey is too smart for you!” The township, described by Langston as formerly “anti-negro and of positive detestable pro-slavery character in its

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<sup>48</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 137.

hatred of such a community and college as those of Oberlin,” gave a large majority of its votes to Townsend in the general election.<sup>49</sup>

However, those votes would not be enough to elect Townshend to Congress, and despite Ohio casting more votes for Hale and Julian than any other state, the national Free Democratic ticket went down to defeat as well.<sup>50</sup> The *Oberlin Evangelist* expressed grief at the Democratic triumph. “Our chief consolation,” the editor wrote, “is that Jehovah sitteth on a yet higher throne, making the utmost use of even the misrule of men.” Still, the West proved itself the most steadfast in its Third Party support, and even though the loss of the Van Buren voters of 1848 was regrettable, “truer and more reliable men” had cast their ballots for freedom in 1852, “and on better and more enduring principles.”<sup>51</sup>

In fact, the writer found much in the 1852 election to suggest hope for the antislavery cause. For one, the Whig party appeared to be in shambles, maybe even in its death throes. Its only hope for survival, he wrote, would have been to take decided ground against slavery. That done, the Whigs could have possibly carried the “heavy free states,” yet they “foisted the monstrous pro-slavery plank into her political platform, to conciliate the South, and hoped by her choice of the least offensive of her Presidential candidates, to conciliate the North.” In trying to please everyone, the Whigs pleased nobody, “and her monstrous compromise plank proved a millstone to her neck as she launched off upon the political sea. May her doom be a warning!”<sup>52</sup>

At the same time, “freedom rejoice[d]” in the election of abolitionists Joshua Giddings and Edward Wade of Ohio, and Gerrit Smith of New York to Congress. “The great political men of the past are gone—Calhoun, Clay and Webster!,” the

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<sup>49</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 137-139.

<sup>50</sup> *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, December 17, 1852.

<sup>51</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 8, 1852.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*



*Oberlin Evangelist* editor wrote, and he mockingly eulogized the South, who “sits in her widowhood, without one great mind to lead her...glad to fawn upon a fourth rate man of the North, if he will only save her from ruin.” The election of a cadre of abolitionists seemed clear proof that antislavery sentiment was on the rise. “Dare anyone deny,” the editor asked, “that the tide of Anti-Slavery feeling is rising with a deep mountain swell, to ebb no more till the whole land is swept and bathed in its power?”<sup>53</sup>

### **“NO MORE COMPROMISES”**

However, the Pierce administration was largely successful in keeping discussion of the slavery issue to a minimum for its first year, though it was despite the constant prodding of abolitionists. Finney asked his congregation “Shall we let this entire subject alone, and go in for contention of the other issues as if they had any importance worth naming in the comparison?”<sup>54</sup> John Langston frankly told a New York audience in 1853 that despite the efforts of Congress to stifle it, they could not check agitation. “Go,” he told his audience, “and padlock all the whites at the North—go padlock all the mouths of all the slaveholders at the South...Still you cannot check agitation...As long as there remained a vestige of Slavery, so long there would be agitation.”<sup>55</sup> Beginning in late 1853, Illinois senator Stephen Douglas’ attempt to organize the Nebraska Territory would make sure that more than just a vestige of slavery discussion would engross the United States.

Douglas’ plan was originally meant to organize the territory above the 36°30’ line of the Missouri Compromise to expedite the development of a trans-continental railroad. However, he soon found that to achieve passage of his bill, he would have to

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<sup>53</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 8, 1852.

<sup>54</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 18, 1852.

<sup>55</sup> *New York Tribune* July 19, 1853 in *Liberator*, July 22, 1853.

finesse powerful Southerners in the Senate. The result was the introduction of legislation that repealed the 1820 Missouri Compromise and opened up the Territories to slavery if residents so voted under a “popular sovereignty” provision. This could have potentially created a slave state from territory formerly declared beyond the reach of the institution. When Pierce made support of the bill a test of loyalty within his party, many northern Whigs and Democrats, Free Democrats, and abolitionists all geared up for an aggressive fight.<sup>56</sup>

Immediately after the “Kansas-Nebraska Bill” was introduced into the Senate, Oberlin residents called a meeting to express their burning indignation at the government’s audacity in attempting an “atrocious” repeal of the Missouri Compromise with a new “nefarious scheme.”<sup>57</sup> Professor James Fairchild stressed that the area in question was the very territory to which the 1820 compromise was meant to apply. He argued that since the South had gained all the advantages that it could expect from that bargain, they now hoped to annul it and “rob freedom of what was granted.”<sup>58</sup> The attendees resolved that “the eternal condemnation of all honest men should forever attach to every member of Congress who speaks or votes for this abominable measure.” They declared that “a bolder or more reckless attempt to seal the fate of Government as a Republic, has never been made; we look upon it with horror and pray God it may never succeed.”<sup>59</sup>

However, Douglas’ stout efforts pushed the bill through both Houses, and in May, it was signed into law. Quickly, though, many abolitionists realized that the bill’s passage might not be the horrific event the *Oberlin Evangelist* initially predicted, and indeed might contain a bright silver lining. John Langston, for one, scolded

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<sup>56</sup> See Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 672.

<sup>57</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 15, 1854.

<sup>58</sup> James Harris Fairchild, “Nebraska,” n.d., James Harris Fairchild papers, RG 2/3, Series 8, Box 9, OCA.

<sup>59</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 15, 1854; *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, February 2, 1854.

America for its past blindness to the iniquities of slavery, but expressed hope for the impetus that the Act would give the abolitionist cause. In a speech before the American Anti-Slavery Society's 1855 anniversary, Langston repeated the maxim that "a nation might lose its liberty in a day and be a century in finding it out." He remarked that now there was not a single American who could truly say, "'I have my full share of liberty,'" and predicted that such dissatisfaction would create valuable political allies in the antislavery cause.<sup>60</sup> The bitter taste of the Fugitive Act still lingered in the mouths of many Northerners, and yet another concession to the Slave Power offered a chance for abolitionists to shepherd anti-Nebraska sentiment into a new political vehicle. As James Monroe wrote, the disgust finally enabled "the dullest Northern Men to see that the country could not continue to exist half slave and half free—that slavery and freedom were, as they always must be, engaged in mortal conflict, and one or the other must perish."<sup>61</sup>

Oberlin's initial response to the "consummated iniquity" was to hold a series of meetings to explore proposals to divorce the federal government from slavery, "and put[ ] it actively on the side of Freedom." A July 1 meeting of voters in Oberlin reaffirmed its resolve to accept "no more compromises—no yielding to the South."<sup>62</sup> The annual August political meeting in Oberlin to select delegates to the district convention took the opportunity to clarify its "Anti-Slavery Platform" in light of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill. The bill, they declared, had proven again their insistence that the contest between slavery and freedom was a "war of extermination. These were antagonistic principles between which there could be no harmony, common interest, or compromise. "Our war," the platform read, "is with Slavery itself, as well as all its

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<sup>60</sup> *The New York Times*, May 10, 1855; See also *Liberator*, May 18, 1855.

<sup>61</sup> James Monroe, "My First Legislative Experience," in *Oberlin Thursday Lectures, Addresses, and Essays* (Oberlin, 1897), 97.

<sup>62</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 6, 1854.

usurpations and aggressions,” and delegates vowed to seek the destruction of the institution where it already existed and to stop its expansion. Moreover, they demanded the repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law, the prohibition of slavery in the Territories and District of Columbia, the abolition of the coast-wise and inter-state slave trade, the refusal of statehood to any territory that allowed slavery, as well as employment of “the entire moral power of the Government at home and abroad” towards emancipation. “The time has come,” they concluded, “when the people of the North should rally and combine their energies, not only to prevent the spread of slavery, but to crush the system itself.”<sup>63</sup>

Even though the building anti-Nebraska agitation was forming into an antislavery political association with an anti-Black element similar to that which had haunted the Free Soil Party in 1848, Oberlin abolitionists, even its African American reformers, had faith that it could eventually coalesce into a party of freedom. William Howard Day and John Langston stumped it up for anti-Nebraska candidates across Ohio and the Northern states, and conservatives noted the men’s successes as portents of things to come: “negro stump-speakers! negro voters! negro jurors! negro office-holders!”<sup>64</sup> Many in Ohio were already calling supporters of the new party “Republicans,” and as an old man, Langston would proudly recall that “I was present at the party’s birth. I helped to dress it.”<sup>65</sup>

The success that anti-Nebraska politicians found after the passage of the act was staggering. In Ohio, the gauge of public opinion was evident in the widespread condemnation of Stephen Douglas. Realizing that his legislation was pulling the national Democratic Party apart along sectional lines, Douglas set off on a conciliatory

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<sup>63</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 16, 1854; *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, August 25, 1854.

<sup>64</sup> *Tiffin (Ohio) Advertiser*, n.d., in *Liberator*, October 12, 1855; *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, April 20, May 18, 1855.

<sup>65</sup> *The Boston Herald*, September 26, 1891.

tour across the northwest at the end of the Congressional session. However, he found only furious crowds awaiting him at nearly every stop. “All along the Western Reserve of Ohio,” Douglas remarked, “I saw my effigy upon every tree we passed.”<sup>66</sup>

As state election returns accumulated in October, the *Cleveland Leader* confidently declared “Ohio All Anti-Nebraska!”<sup>67</sup> Voters elected “an unbroken Anti-Nebraska delegation” to Congress, including Elyria abolitionist and Langston mentor Philemon Bliss, who pulled to victory on an overwhelming majority from the town of Oberlin, Russia Township, and Lorain County.<sup>68</sup> The next year, Russia Township voters gave the candidates of the Republican Party proper a majority of nearly four hundred votes, and the *Oberlin Evangelist* declared the results “an Anti-Slavery Triumph.”<sup>69</sup> It was, the editor declared, a clear mass movement “to rebuke the slavery propagandism of our times—an omen of the certain triumph of Freedom in her present conflict against Slavery—the inauguration of an era in which corrupt politicians must give place to men of known moral principle!”<sup>70</sup>

### **“GOD GO WITH THEM”**

The Kansas-Nebraska crisis also sparked another national movement in which Oberlin played a vital role. The fact that the fate of slavery in states carved from the Territories would be decided by the votes of its citizens encouraged thousands of partisans from across the nation to emigrate there in an attempt to swell support for their particular side of the slavery debate. In February of 1854, Eli Thayer, a member of the Massachusetts legislature, began the organization of a joint stock corporation

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<sup>66</sup> Douglas quoted in Stephen B. Oates, *The Approaching Fury: Voices of the Storm, 1820-1861* (New York, 1998), 152.

<sup>67</sup> *Cleveland Leader*, October 12, 1854.

<sup>68</sup> Monroe, “My First Legislative Experience,” 97-8; Joseph Patterson Smith, *History of the Republican Party in Ohio*, Vol.1 (Chicago, 1898), 26-31.

<sup>69</sup> Monroe, “My First Legislative Experience,” 98; *Oberlin Evangelist*, October 24, 1855.

<sup>70</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, October 24, 1855.

that would pay healthy dividends for its investors while also contributing antislavery votes to Kansas Territorial elections. The New England Emigrant Aid Company (N.E.E.A.C) was primarily to be a money-making venture. Humanitarian concerns, if there were any, were a distant adjunct motivation. The earliest historian of the Kansas Aid movement wrote in 1854 that most emigrant companies asked no questions of their emigrants and took no real political position.<sup>71</sup> When they did, as did the N.E.E.A.C.'s primary donor Amos Lawrence, their statements were hardly progressive. Writing to a South Carolinian, Lawrence admitted that he had never countenanced the abolitionist movement. In fact, he had most recently offered generous support to colonization societies that he assumed was "destined to make a greater change in the condition of the blacks than any event since the Christian era."<sup>72</sup>

On August 21, 1854, the Kansas Emigrant Aid Association of Northern Ohio (A.A.N.O.) was organized in Oberlin, structured around the Oberlin Emigrant Aid Company that had been organized four months earlier.<sup>73</sup> Its basic mission was similar to Thayer's intention to swell free soil ballot boxes in the Territories, yet it was not to be a profit-oriented venture. Moreover, the A.A.N.O.'s emigrants were selectively chosen for their avowed abolitionism.<sup>74</sup> Most Easterners would have agreed with the New York man who later urged the A.A.N.O. to avoid "rash and hasty" statements in favor of those that would "enable the conservative men of the North to act with and aid us."<sup>75</sup> However, the selection of abolitionists with Oberlin ties such as Norton Townshend, James Thome, James Fairchild, Timothy Hudson, Henry Peck, and John

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<sup>71</sup> Edward Everett Hale, *Kansas and Nebraska: The History, Geographical and Physical Characteristics, and Political Position of These Territories; An Account of the Emigrant Aid Companies, and Directions to Emigrants* (Boston, 1854), 244.

<sup>72</sup> Amos Lawrence to "A Friend in South Carolina," June 12, 1852, in *Extracts From the Diary and Correspondence of the Late Amos Lawrence*, ed. William R. Lawrence (Boston, 1855), 317-318.

<sup>73</sup> Samuel Adair to Simeon S. Jocelyn, April 18, 1854, American Missionary Association Archives (hereafter AMA), Ohio, microfilm roll 4; *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 30, 1854; *National Era*, September 7, 1854; *New York Evangelist*, September 7, 1854.

<sup>74</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 27, 1854.

<sup>75</sup> *The New York Times*, June 23, 1856.

Reed to the executive committee of the association at the Oberlin meeting suggested a radically different path. “Spirited” abolitionist speeches by Asa Mahan, John Langston, Peck, Townshend, Thome, and others left no doubt as to the true motivations of the Northern Ohioans.<sup>76</sup>

“A great crisis is upon us,” the convention declared; “Let Slavery triumph now, and the fate of this nation may be sealed.” If Kansas was lost, the effect would be embolden proslavery advocates, discourage the “friends of Liberty,” so that “even with more rapid strides, despotism will march forward in the consummation of its avowed end, viz.: the entire subjugation of the nation.” They enthusiastically held up two plans of action: to elect true-hearted men to Congress, and to begin sending into Kansas a committed antislavery population. They pledged that “to the consummation of an end so important, we will give both our time, our means, and our untiring energy.”<sup>77</sup>

The convention sent agents to consult with the N.E.E.A.C. to determine what terms could be reached for the transport and settlement of its emigrants.<sup>78</sup> However, the report of Elyria’s Ralph Plumb convinced the association that the wisest and most consistent path to take would be to act independently of the N.E.E.A.C. Since the basic principles of the A.A.N.O. appeared to be so dissimilar, the executive committee also decided that a special effort should be made to win the battle of ideologies as well as that of numbers. To that end, the committee reported that as much as their means would allow, they would support the erection and maintenance of schools and supply them with able abolitionist teachers.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *The National Era*, September 7, 1854; *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 30, 1854.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *The Ohio Observer*, September 20, 1854.

<sup>79</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 27, 1854.

Corresponding Secretary John Reed went out from Oberlin to canvass the Western Reserve and nearby counties to organize auxiliary societies and recruit emigrant families of the abolitionist stripe.<sup>80</sup> On October 23, 1854, the first company of forty three emigrants set out from Oberlin, and by the time it reached Chicago, its numbers had swelled enough to merit reduced rates by rail to St. Louis.<sup>81</sup> All told, the association sent out at least seven groups of emigrants of between twenty and more than a hundred people each during the Kansas crisis from 1854-1860.<sup>82</sup>

When they reached Kansas Territory, the companies from the A.A.N.O. would find even more familiar faces on the ground to help them in the coming struggles. The antislavery American Missionary Association had already begun sending missionary emigrants to the area in the summer of 1854. Some of the first volunteers for the A.M.A. crusade were Oberlin men and women who sought to labor in the field where their influence would be “most felt for the cause of the Lord and the Slave.”<sup>83</sup> Their initial mission was to establish abolitionist churches and schools for the families of emigrants moving west—churches, notably, that did not fellowship slaveholders and schools that taught out of “books of an anti-slavery character.”<sup>84</sup>

A.M.A. missionaries from Oberlin, however, were even more radical than their handlers back East thought wise. Association head Simeon Jocelyn warned Oberlinite John Byrd that he should not make the slavery issue “too prominent” in his Sabbath labors.<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, Byrd threw all caution to the wind and settled in the midst of a

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<sup>80</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 30, 1854; *The National Era*, September 7, 1854.

<sup>81</sup> *Cleveland Leader*, November 1, 1854.

<sup>82</sup> Robert S. Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College: From its Foundation Through the Civil War*, Vol.I (Oberlin, 1943), 392.

<sup>83</sup> Samuel Adair to Simeon S. Jocelyn, June 24, 1854, AMA, Ohio, microfilm roll 1; See also Samuel Adair to Simeon S. Jocelyn, May 3, 1855, AMA, Kansas, microfilm roll 1.

<sup>84</sup> Samuel Adair to Simeon S. Jocelyn, September 8, 1855, [www.territorialkansasonline.org](http://www.territorialkansasonline.org) (accessed July 22, 2009); John Byrd to Simeon Jocelyn, August 11, 1856, AMA, Kansas, microfilm roll 1; Gunja Sengupta, *For God and Mammon: Evangelicals and Entrepreneurs, Masters and Slaves in Territorial Kansas, 1854-1860* (Athens, 1996), 61.

<sup>85</sup> John Byrd to Simeon S. Jocelyn, January 20, 1859, AMA, Kansas, microfilm roll 1.



group of proslavery emigrants.<sup>86</sup> One particular sermon of his regarding the “nefarious institution of slavery” near proslavery Leavenworth nearly got him tarred and feathered, and only vigilante imprisonment by a proslavery mob could stop his crusade to convert the ruffians.<sup>87</sup>

The clear differences in the A.A.N.O. and most of the other emigrant groups were remarkable. Even before they reached Kansas, one Oberlin man noted with disgust that his party had found themselves on the same steamer with thirty Georgia men “drinking and swearing about the abolitionists,” bound for the same territory.<sup>88</sup> Another Oberlin alumnus spent a good portion of his time on the boat contrasting Oberlinite Samuel Wood’s company of “intellectual, noble, quiet young men,” with the Southerners “who swagger and swear, play cards and drink brandy, and act as though their only special mission on earth, Kansas, or any where else—was to wage a war of extermination upon huge plugs of tobacco and bad whiskey.”<sup>89</sup> No doubt the habit of Oberlin men holding regular religious services and their hymn singing en route to Kansas would have made this distinction even more evident.<sup>90</sup>

Once in Kansas, the contrast remained, even when compared to other free soilers. One Osawatomie settler wrote candidly of his associates in Kansas in 1855: “The community here are very nearly united on the free-state question. But the majority would dislike and resent being called abolitionists.” There was “a prevailing sentiment” against admitting African Americans into the territory at all, slave or free.<sup>91</sup> For most Kansas free soilers, the fight was more about retaining the Territories

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<sup>86</sup> Sengupta, *For God and Mammon*, 60.

<sup>87</sup> John Byrd to Simeon Jocelyn, July 7, August 3, 1855, AMA, Kansas, microfilm roll 1; Elizabeth Byrd to George Whipple, August 28, September 3, 1856, AMA, Kansas, microfilm roll 1.

<sup>88</sup> *Cleveland Weekly Herald*, April 30, 1856.

<sup>89</sup> *Cleveland Weekly Herald*, April 23, 1856.

<sup>90</sup> Henry Cowles, Jr. to Henry Cowles, November 11, 13, 1854, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 13, OCA.

<sup>91</sup> John Everett to Dear Father, January 25, 1856, reprinted in “Letters of John and Sarah Everett, 1854-1864,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol.8, No.1 (February, 1939), [http://www.kancoll.org/khq/1939/39\\_1\\_everett.htm](http://www.kancoll.org/khq/1939/39_1_everett.htm) (accessed July 16, 2009).

for exclusively white settlement; their opposition to slavery was not because of the outrages committed against the slaves, but because the slaves happened to be Black. One traveler passing through rightly declared that “The Free State men warred not against slavery in the abstract, only slavery in Kansas.” Most of them lived “in deadly terror of being termed ‘abolitionists’—frightened at the mere mention of that mysterious specter—‘negro equality.’”<sup>92</sup>

Besides their aggressive abolitionism, emigrants connected to Oberlin also did what they could to defend the rights of the Kansas Crusade’s largely absent subjects, African Americans. Oberlin alumnus Samuel Adair, John Brown’s brother-in-law, expressed his frustration at the insistence on most Kansas emigrants to not only bar slavery from the Territory, but free African Americans as well. “Their Free Soil is Free Soil for *white*, but *not* for *black*,” he wrote, “They hate slavery but they hate the negro worse.” He concluded that the ignorance of some of those men was “most profound.”<sup>93</sup> Oberlin classmate John Byrd also feared that many who claimed freedom for themselves were not willing to yield the same right “to those ‘guilty of a skin not colored like their own.’”<sup>94</sup> Byrd wrote that “these people are intensely anti-abolitionist, and if colored persons are to be allowed to come in at all, they would prefer that they should enter as slaves rather than free men.”<sup>95</sup>

Byrd was a delegate to the October 1855 convention called to organize a Free State Party in Kansas, yet when the issue of African Americans’ place in the Territory arose, Byrd was greatly disappointed. Most delegates to the convention classed abolitionists “with horse thieves,” and overwhelmingly approved a resolution that

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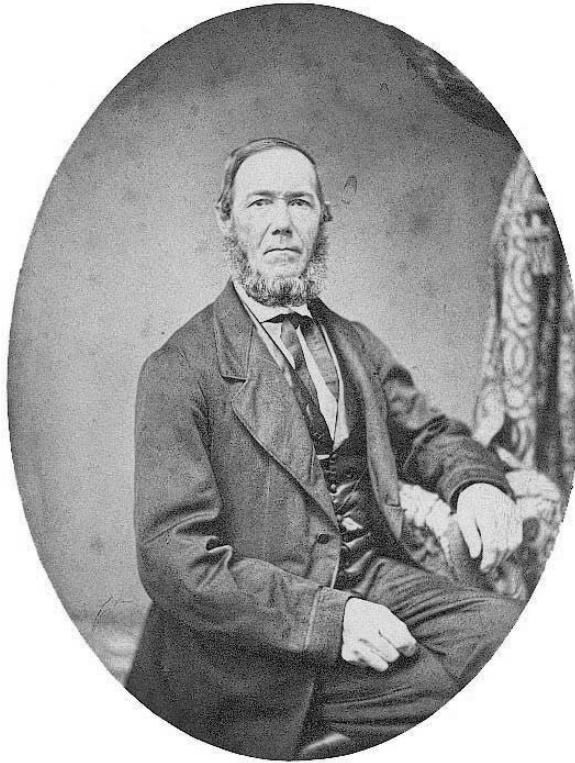
<sup>92</sup> Albert D. Richardson, *Beyond the Mississippi: From the Great River to the Great Ocean* (Hartford, 1867), 43.

<sup>93</sup> Samuel Adair to Simeon Jocelyn, n.d. [1855?], AMA, Kansas, microfilm roll 1; See also Horatio Norton to Simeon Jocelyn, June 10, 1857, AMA, Kansas, microfilm roll 1.

<sup>94</sup> John Byrd to Simeon Jocelyn, August 7, 1856, AMA, Kansas, microfilm roll 4.

<sup>95</sup> John H. Byrd to Simeon Jocelyn, August 5, 1855, AMA, Kansas, microfilm roll 1.

would bar African Americans from settling in Kansas.<sup>96</sup> Byrd's was the single vote in opposition among the thirteen man committee.<sup>97</sup> Yet another Oberlin classmate and A.M.A. missionary Horatio Norton most feared the inclusion of iniquitous Black Laws in the platform. Norton believed that the free soilers were legitimately the majority, yet antislavery racists' insistence on barring African American immigration threatened to either divide them or force a compromising racial code upon the nominally free state. Norton told Simeon Jocelyn "I cannot—whatever others may do—join in committing one wrong even to prevent a greater evil."<sup>98</sup>



**Illustration 8.3: Rev. Samuel Adair  
(Kansas State Historical Society)**

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<sup>96</sup> John H. Byrd to Simeon Jocelyn, November 16, 1855, AMA, Kansas, microfilm roll 1.

<sup>97</sup> John H. Byrd to Simeon S. Jocelyn, October 16, 1855, AMA, Kansas, microfilm roll 4.

<sup>98</sup> Horatio Norton to Simeon S. Jocelyn, June 10, 1857, AMA, Kansas, microfilm roll 5.

Back in Ohio, people in Oberlin followed the unfolding events in Kansas with a watchful eye. A correspondent in Lawrence wrote to the *Oberlin Evangelist* that fraud and violence ruled the day at the first territorial election. Border Ruffians from “rode over the free citizens of the Territory, trampled the sacred rights of the ballot-box in the dust, and now glory in their own infamy.”<sup>99</sup> Henry Cowles, Jr. wrote home to Oberlin describing a similar scene at the next election in March. “A *Missouri mob* took possession of the polls,” he told his father, and the free soilers were threatened with guns and knives while the belligerent ruffians “did *all* the voting.”<sup>100</sup>

Early in 1856, Samuel Wood, by then a veteran of two tours in Kansas, told a rapt Oberlin audience of his travails in the Territory and the dangers emigrants faced at the hands of Border Ruffians. Self-preservation was of vital importance to Kansas emigrants, yet critics charged Wood with soliciting funds “to carry a war there [to Kansas].” As he told his listeners what he had experienced firsthand at the hands of proslavery mobs, a critic described the Oberlin crowd’s reaction and remarked that “it was plain to see their meek and non-resistant spirits turning into fighting demons.” Yet Wood’s appeal left room for the most peace-loving Oberlinite, even those “whose tender consciences would not permit of their giving to buy powder, ball, and rifles for war.” These no-less honorable partisans were still able to donate money and goods by earmarking it “for provision or clothing.”<sup>101</sup>

Companies continued to go out from Ohio expecting war, both moral and physical. The Oberlin community was especially generous in its efforts to properly arm the companies, contributing hundreds of dollars and rifles to the cause.<sup>102</sup> The

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<sup>99</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, April 25, 1855; See also Samuel Adair to Henry Cowles, January 30, 1855, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 13, OCA.

<sup>100</sup> Henry Cowles, Jr. to Henry Cowles, April 2, 1855, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 13, OCA; See also Henry Cowles, Jr. to Henry Cowles, March 26, 1855, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 13, OCA.

<sup>101</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, February 13, 1856.

<sup>102</sup> *Cleveland Independent Democrat*, February 6, 13, 1856.

*Oberlin Evangelist* lamented the fact that such weapons were necessary at all. “We blush for our country, and our nominal Christianity,” the editor wrote, “when we think of the need of Sharpe’s rifles to protect peaceable citizens against ‘Border ruffians’ set on solely by the spirit of slavery-propagandism.”<sup>103</sup> Yet Oberlin’s participants in the struggle were rare among Kansas emigrants in that whenever possible, they used their words as weapons instead of their guns.<sup>104</sup> Though Samuel Adair and his wife Florella Brown Adair were connected by blood to John Brown, and often shared their 16 by 16 foot Osawatomie cabin with Brown and his sons, Adair refused shelter to one of his nephews who had participated in the brutal slaying of five proslavery men at Pottawattamie Creek. When Owen Brown rapped on the Adair’s door late on May 25, 1856, Adair refused to unbar it. Only a little earlier, however, Florella had allowed John Jr. and Jason Brown shelter upon their assurance that they had nothing to do with the slayings, reminding them nonetheless that “we risk our lives keeping you.”<sup>105</sup>

The news of the sack of Lawrence, the free soil capital in Kansas, by a proslavery army hit Oberlin like a bombshell. Men and women crowded into the College chapel to take part in an impromptu meeting called to express their righteous anger against the Slave Power in Kansas. James Monroe declared himself at a loss for words over the “audacity and atrocity” of the proslavery mob’s attack on the city. His colleague Timothy Hudson, however, filled any void that Monroe may have left and declared that “the spirit of true democracy had utterly perished from the self-styled democratic party.” Instead of upholding governance “by the people, and for the

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<sup>103</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, April 7, 1856.

<sup>104</sup> See Betty DeRamus, *Freedom by Any Means: Con Games, Voodoo Schemes, True Love and Lawsuits on the Underground Railroad* (New York, 2009), 99.

<sup>105</sup> Evan Carton, *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America* (New York, 2006), 198-9, 218. See also James Redpath, *The Public Life of Captain John Brown* (Boston, 1860), 142; Samuel Adair to Simeon Jocelyn, May 23, 1856, AMA, Kansas, microfilm roll 1; John H. Byrd to Simeon Jocelyn, June 9, 1856, AMA, Kansas, microfilm roll 1. Frederick Brown, another of John Brown’s sons, would be shot down just outside the Adair home not long thereafter.

people, they had surrendered themselves, bound hand and foot, to the sway of a petty oligarchy.”<sup>106</sup>

Though their support had never wavered for their friends in Kansas, the fall of Lawrence, coupled with news of the violent caning of Charles Sumner by a Southerner on the floor of the United States Senate, pushed the Oberlin community into a heightened sense of urgency and agitation. The words of John Langston just a handful of months earlier had never seemed so true. If slavery triumphed in Kansas, the fate of the nation would be sealed. But, should Kansas be rescued from the evils of slavery, it would “plume afresh the drooping wing of Freedom, and inspire a rational hope, that, having vanquished the slave power *once*, the North will be filled with a life which shall work out the complete redemption of our government, and the enfranchisement of the oppressed millions of our land.”<sup>107</sup>

Again, Oberlin rose to the challenge. By late May of 1856, “Charlie” Finney and Henry Cowles, Jr. were fighting for the antislavery ideals of their namesakes on the plains of Kansas.<sup>108</sup> Oberlin men already on the ground stepped up their agitation to the point where their names were placed on the ruffians’ “hanging list,” and they were singled out by mobs to be imprisoned by proslavery forces.<sup>109</sup> In July, the elder Finney went to Buffalo on his son’s behalf to the organizational meeting of the National Kansas Committee. That convention proposed establishing state and county committees to recruit volunteers, and raise money for arms and supplies to keep the free soilers well-equipped in the field.<sup>110</sup> That same summer, Oberlin’s senior class

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<sup>106</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, June 4, 1856; See also Mary L. Cowles diary, May 26-27, June 19, 1856, RG 30/24, FP, Box 5, Folder 6, OCA.

<sup>107</sup> See *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 30, September 27, 1854.

<sup>108</sup> See Mary Cowles diary, May 26-28, 1856, RG 30/24, FP, Box 5, Folder 6, OCA.

<sup>109</sup> *American Missionary*, Vol.X, No.10 (October, 1856), 29.

<sup>110</sup> *Boston Daily Advertiser*, July 17, 1856, excerpted in Eli Thayer, *A History of the Kansas Crusade: Its Friends and Its Foes* (New York, 1889), 214-216; James David Essig, “The Lord’s Free Man: Charles G. Finney and His Abolitionism,” *Civil War History*, 24 (1978), 42-3. It was through this organization that John Brown received assistance in his own Kansas crusades. See *The Life and Letters*

petitioned the faculty to allow them permission to graduate early so that they could emigrate as soon as possible. Mary Cowles remarked in her journal that the members of other classes would doubtless follow as well, and earnestly prayed that “God go with them.”<sup>111</sup>

### **“AS FAST AS PUBLIC OPINION WOULD SUSTAIN”**

Back in the already-organized states, the party that had coalesced around opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act was gaining members and influence and taking on a more definite shape. Despite attempts by a few antislavery Whig faithful to reassert their party’s free soil credentials, the new Republican Party was reaping the defections from the sectionally-split national organizations and adding them to its own solid base. In 1854, anti-Nebraska fusion candidates had taken 100 of the 234 seats in the Thirty Fourth Congress. The uproar over “Bloody Kansas” and “Bloody Sumner” would be the last straws for many antislavery Whigs and Democrats who refused to be cowed by the Slave Power.<sup>112</sup>

In March of 1856, organizers sent out a call for a national convention to be held in Philadelphia. Delegates were invited “without regard to past political differences or divisions” to oppose the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, the policy of the current administration, the extension of slavery into the Territories, and in support of the admission of Kansas as a free state. Ohio Republicans adopted the language of the national committee in issuing their own call for a state convention, that would meet approximately two weeks before the national body. Oberlin’s Henry Peck was among the delegates from the Ohio convention who were selected to go on

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*of John Brown; Liberator of Kansas and Martyr of Virginia*, ed. F.B. Sanborn (Concord, 1910), 346-347.

<sup>111</sup> Mary Cowles diary, June 19, 1856, RG 30/24, FP, Box 5, Folder 6, OCA.

<sup>112</sup> Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 685.

to represent the them in Philadelphia and who helped pass through a platform that was quite radical in comparison with that of the Whigs and Democrats.<sup>113</sup>

The first national Republican platform highlighted the egalitarian principles of the Declaration of Independence, denied the authority of Congress to legalize slavery in any territory under its jurisdiction, and arraigned the Pierce administration for sanctioning the atrocities in Kansas and for committing a “high crime against the Constitution, the Union, and humanity” in the process. Still, radicals within the party were dissatisfied that the platform only denied Congressional authority to establish slavery by positive legislation, rather than affirming the ability of Congress to interfere with slavery where it already existed. Its insistence that the government uphold the rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” only applied to “persons under its exclusive jurisdiction,” thus effectively sanctioning slavery in the states and sustaining the legality of the Fugitive Slave Law.<sup>114</sup>

Still, despite the view of some antislavery advocates that political antislavery had been fatally diluted since its earliest days, the fact remained that the only alternatives to the Republicans’ avowedly-antislavery nominee John Frémont were Fillmore, now the candidate of the weak American (“Know-Nothing”) Party, who had signed the Fugitive Slave Bill into law and overseen the Kansas outrages, and Democrat James Buchanan, who was pledged to uphold the Act and oppose Kansas’ admission as a free state.<sup>115</sup> John Langston, writing with the Business Committee of the 1856 Ohio State Convention of Colored Men, rejoiced at the death of the Whig Party, “once a strong ally of Despotism,” and in the diminishing influence of the Democracy, “the black hearted apostle of American slavery.” However, he welcomed

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<sup>113</sup> Smith, *History of the Republican Party in Ohio*, 53; *Proceedings of the First Three Republican National of 1856, 1860, and 1864*, (Minneapolis, 1893), 40.

<sup>114</sup> Thomas McKee, *The National Conventions and Platforms of All Political Parties, 1789-1904* (Baltimore, 1904), 96-99; Smith, *History of the Republican Party in Ohio*, 55-56.

<sup>115</sup> See Frederick May Holland, *Frederick Douglass: The Colored Orator* (New York, 1891), 249.



the new Republican party, and though it clearly was not yet the true party of freedom that would tolerate “no law for slavery,” it stood out as the real and best hope of achieving the political goals of abolitionism that had ever existed. Despite its shortcomings, Langston asserted that the party “may do great service in the cause of Freedom.”<sup>116</sup>

Monroe expressed similar sentiments when he accepted the nomination of the Lorain County Republicans for the Ohio legislature in 1855. The Republicans in Ohio were more radical than the national organization, and some of its more progressive leaders wanted a representative from Oberlin in Columbus to help neutralize the conservative element of the party.<sup>117</sup> Monroe had twice previously rejected Free Soil nominations for the legislature, believing that the platform left too much to be desired to represent the party in the legislature. In 1855, though, he realized that his rightful “place” was with the men who were “constantly striving, and with a good degree of success, to elevate” the principles of the Free Soil heir, the Republican Party. It took votes to make political progress, and Monroe’s influence would be a healthy one for the party. “If the new party were not moving as fast as I could wish,” he believed, “they were, perhaps, moving as fast as public opinion would sustain.”<sup>118</sup>

Monroe coasted to victory with nearly ninety percent of the vote in his district, running far ahead of his ticket that also contributed an 1,800 vote majority to Salmon Chase in his successful bid for governor.<sup>119</sup> Meanwhile, Ohio Democrats grew apprehensive. The Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, though not missing the opportunity to

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<sup>116</sup> “Proceedings of the State Convention of Colored Men, Held in the City of Columbus, Ohio, Jan. 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, & 18<sup>th</sup>, 1856,” in *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865*, Vol.I, ed. Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker (Philadelphia, 1979), 308.

<sup>117</sup> Monroe, “My First Legislative Experience,” 98-99; Smith, *History of the Republican Party in Ohio*, 59-63.

<sup>118</sup> Monroe, “My First Legislative Experience,” 148-149.

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*, 100; Catherine M. Rokicky, *James Monroe: Oberlin’s Christian Statesman and Reformer, 1821-1898* (Kent, 2002), 25-26; Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 270.

insult Oberlin, expressed its fear after the enthusiastic “Lorain fusion” of 1855.

“Oberlin, her professors and students,” the editor complained, “have at last got control of the universal whig party in that county.” They worried that the school and town that had been “so long the dictator of morals and religion for this region of the country, has now become dictator in its politics.”<sup>120</sup> Reflecting on his mandate, Monroe wrote “it was still a new thing for an old abolitionist to be elected to office, and it was certainly a new thing to me. A shower of friendly votes was a pleasanter experience than a shower of brickbats.”<sup>121</sup>

Still, the obstacles that progressive Republicans in Ohio and nationwide would face in their crusade for emancipation and African American civil rights were considerable. Abolitionists within the party who hoped to push the boundaries of the organization’s bare-bones antislavery platform had to compete with conservatives who eschewed any attempts to go beyond nominal anti-expansionism, not to mention proposed abolitionist measures that offended their often virulent racism. The views of one prominent Ohio Republican in 1858 could stand for many earlier in the decade: “The ‘negro question,’ as we understand it,” John Greiner declared, “is a white man’s question, the question of the right of free white laborers to the soil of the territories. It is not to be crushed or retarded by shouting ‘Sambo’ at us.” To make his point even clearer, Greiner explained that “We have no Sambo in our platform...We object to Sambo. We don't want him about. We insist that he shall not be forced upon us.”<sup>122</sup>

Monroe ran into similar resistance when he first attempted to introduce a *habeas corpus* bill before the Ohio House in 1856. “About one-half of the Republicans were very conservative,” he recalled, “and much inclined to vote with the

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<sup>120</sup> Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, September 12, 1855.

<sup>121</sup> Monroe, “My First Legislative Experience,” 101.

<sup>122</sup> Greiner quoted in Earl W. Wiley, “‘Governor’ John Greiner and Chase’s Bid for the Presidency in 1860,” *Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, 58 (1949), 262.

Democrats upon any question which looked like one of Abolitionism.”<sup>123</sup> Monroe trod carefully; he flatly declared to the House that he was not a nullifier or disunionist, but rather a decided states rights man. Still, he believed the Fugitive Slave Law violated the spirit of freedom in the supposed free states and admitted that he “should rejoice...to see the State of Ohio ignore that law for the unconstitutional and rotten abomination that it is.”<sup>124</sup>

In a move reminiscent of Oberlin’s decision more than twenty years earlier to admit students “irrespective of color” without explicitly mentioning African American applicants, the bill that Monroe finally forced through contained no mention of “fugitives” or “slavery,” but was rather a broad guarantee to the right of the writ of *habeas corpus* to all men and women.<sup>125</sup> In his remarks in support of his bill, Monroe declared himself a staunch abolitionist, but also a practical man as well. “I wish to accomplish something,” he admitted, “and if I cannot get what I would like, I shall not...refuse to get what I can.”<sup>126</sup> It was a compromise of his ideals, yet as his biographer asserts, he considered it a small sacrifice for the hope of even more change in the future.<sup>127</sup>

Monroe represented a large group of antislavery politicians who, though working through a major political party with obvious limitations from an abolitionist point of view, did not limit their own political creed to an official party platform. They did not carelessly abandon their principles, but rather carried them as far as possible into various legislative chambers and party caucuses to press for radicalization from within. The *Oberlin Students’ Monthly* agreed that any and all

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<sup>123</sup> Monroe, “My First Legislative Experience,” 111-112.

<sup>124</sup> Rokicky, *James Monroe*, 36; See also Monroe’s speech “The Fugitive Slave Law,” 1856, RG 30/22, James Monroe papers, RG 30/22, Box 19, OCA.

<sup>125</sup> Monroe, “My First Legislative Experience,” 119-20, 152.

<sup>126</sup> Rokicky, *James Monroe*, 36.

<sup>127</sup> Monroe, “My First Legislative Experience,” 126-127; Rokicky, *James Monroe*, 41.

moves towards their ultimate goals were accumulative. When a “friend of truth” like Monroe made a concession to carry his point, he did not sacrifice principle, but postponed acceptance until a future day.<sup>128</sup> A like-minded Oberlin Republican gathering declared that they hoped to bring slavery to an end where it already existed as well as to oppose its extension over “territory where it is not.” Moreover, where they lacked the political power to assail it directly, they pledged to “use all agencies which may be justly employed, to arouse the nation to a sense of its wickedness, its cruelties and the dangers to which it exposes.” Even if a majority of Republicans claimed themselves powerless to attack slavery because of constitutional limitations, citizens of Oberlin vowed to “go to the very verge of our constitutional power” to that end. Once they reached the limits that party consensus had set, they promised to continue their advocacy of an antislavery Constitution. They would “study the instrument anew” and demonstrate to their more conservative associates “what rights and duties it teaches in regard to universal liberty, which the sophistries of slavery may have hitherto concealed.”<sup>129</sup>

This was the very message Langston expressed to a group of abolitionists during Monroe’s first term in office. “If the Republican Party is not Anti-Slavery enough,” he urged his listeners, “take hold of it and make it so.”<sup>130</sup> Langston and his brother Charles campaigned for Frémont in the style of abolitionist lectures that brooked no compromise.<sup>131</sup> They took the same occasions to criticize the lethargy of the Republicans, press for African American enfranchisement, and all the while lifting up Frémont as the candidate who had the potential to effect the most change.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> *Oberlin Students’ Monthly*, Vol.1, 1858, RG 30/24, FP, Box 18, Folder 11, OCA.

<sup>129</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, n.d., in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, August 25, 1854.

<sup>130</sup> *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, December 4, 1858.

<sup>131</sup> *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, August 2, 9, 16, 1856; *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, May 1, 1856.

<sup>132</sup> William C. Nell to William Lloyd Garrison, August 4, November 10, 1856, in *Liberator*, August 15, November 14, 1856; “Proceedings of the [Ohio] State Convention of Colored Men...1856,” 307-309; *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, May 1, 1856.

Besides the Langstons, other Oberlin professors, students, and residents logged countless miles campaigning for “Frémont and Freedom,” and hundreds of Oberlinites attended Republican rallies whenever one was held in northwestern Ohio.<sup>133</sup> In Newark, Ohio, the Democratic newspaper complained about “Oberlin darkies...stumping it with all their might for Frémont,” and five days later, noted the scheduled lecture of “a learned nigger, said to be a graduate of Oberlin, a man of piety, and a supporter of Frémont.”<sup>134</sup> Oberlin’s commencement exercises in August led a Cleveland correspondent to report that he did not hear a single speech “that was not charged to the muzzle with political abolitionism.”<sup>135</sup> The *Oberlin Evangelist* appealed to its readers “By all that is fearful in the pending crisis—by all that is sacred in freedom and right...to ensure the election of the men whose banner flings to the breeze the freemen’s emphatic sign—*Free Press, Free Speech, Free Men, Frémont and Victory!*”<sup>136</sup> This was the constant cheer of the Oberlin Frémont parade where Anthony Burns, the celebrated “fugitive” who was now an Oberlin student, marched “as a freeman and a brother” with other partisans.<sup>137</sup> For weeks before the election, the five o’clock bell that had once summoned Oberlin students to their manual labor, now called residents to “break-o-day meetings invoking aid from Almighty God in behalf of ‘Freedom and Frémont.’” The day before the election, all business in town was put off so that an appropriate amount of prayer and fasting could be offered on behalf of their candidate.<sup>138</sup>

Oberlin did nearly all within its power (in addition to appeals to the Almighty) to win the day for Frémont. The final tally on Election Day in Russia Township

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<sup>133</sup> (Elyria) *The Independent Democrat*, August 6, 1856.

<sup>134</sup> *Newark Advocate*, August 15, 20, 1856.

<sup>135</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, September 3, 1856.

<sup>136</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 27, 1856.

<sup>137</sup> *Liberator*, November 21, 1856. On Burns, see Albert J. Von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson’s Boston* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>138</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, n.d., in *Newark Advocate*, November 26, 1856.

showed him with more than a five to one advantage over Buchanan.<sup>139</sup> These votes contributed to a Frémont majority statewide, and put Ohio in the Republican column along with all of New England, New York, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Still, Buchanan's sweep of the South and sufficiently strong showing in a handful of Northern states disappointed Frémont's presidential bid. Moreover, besides retaining the Presidency, Democrats riding Buchanan's coattails managed to win control of Congress, and the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Roger Taney, a Southerner, already appeared to lean towards the proslavery end of the political spectrum.<sup>140</sup>

Despite polling over 1,300,000 votes in the presidential election, Republicans' representation in Congress did not reflect a corresponding advance, and even in states that were solidly Republican, the blunt conservatism of the party refused to give up its control. In Ohio, Republicans who might otherwise have followed the prodding of party radicals had to immediately shift gears and consider the 1857 statewide elections that followed less than a year after the national election of 1856. Men like Ohio's moderate Republican Congressman John Sherman took every opportunity they could to disclaim that the radical views of some of their Western Reserve colleagues were not at all representative of Ohio Republicans.<sup>141</sup> Salmon Chase, in the midst of his own re-election campaign for governor of Ohio, cited Republicans' "impaired morale" and poor organization as proof that the party was "in no position to hold...advanced ground."<sup>142</sup> It seemed as if William C. Nell, John Langston's lecturing partner in Ohio for much of 1856 was correct to assume that state Republicans might "play their old game, and defer justice till a more convenient season."<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> The vote was 444 to 77. See Clayton C. Ellsworth, "Oberlin and the Anti-Slavery Movement up to the Civil War," PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1930, 131.

<sup>140</sup> Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 701-702.

<sup>141</sup> James Brewer Stewart, *Joshua R. Giddings and the Tactics of Radical Politics* (Cleveland, 1970), 249-250.

<sup>142</sup> Stewart, *Joshua R. Giddings*, 250-251.

<sup>143</sup> William C. Nell to William Lloyd Garrison, November 10, 1856, in *Liberator*, November 14, 1856.

Nonetheless, Langston, Monroe, and Norton Townsend, with the support of other prominent Lorain County Republicans, undertook another concerted campaign to strike the word “white” from Ohio’s voting qualifications—“the last vestige,” as Langston described it, “of the old barbarous and inhuman Black Laws.”<sup>144</sup> Langston renewed his assault as president of the 1857 Ohio State Convention of Colored Men. In an adept “Address to the Legislature of Ohio,” Langston laid the groundwork for a constitutional amendment allowing Black suffrage based on the “humanity and manhood” of African Americans, the spirit of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, citizenship, status as tax payers, and historically demonstrated patriotism. Langston assured lawmakers that no unjust or oppressive legislation would ever drive African Americans from the state. Instead, the survival of “cruel and despotic statutes” would make Black activists anchor themselves even more solidly to Ohio until they could successfully erase them from the books.<sup>145</sup>

The day after Langston’s address to the African American convention, Monroe delivered a speech in the Ohio House where he proposed the constitutional amendment authorizing African American suffrage.<sup>146</sup> As legislators thumbed through the petitions sent over by Langston’s fellow delegates at the Colored Convention, Monroe unfolded the argument for universal manhood suffrage. Meanwhile, Oberlin’s representative in the Senate, Herman Canfield, reported Langston’s full address to the judiciary committee.<sup>147</sup> Because Monroe admitted that he stood almost alone among legislators in his support of the measure, he declared that he could not, for that very reason, refrain from expressing his convictions and those of

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<sup>144</sup> “Proceedings of the State Convention of Colored Men of the State of Ohio, Held in the City of Columbus, January 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup> & 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1857,” in *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865*, Vol.I, ed. Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker (Philadelphia, 1979), 327; Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 323.

<sup>145</sup> “Proceedings of the State Convention of Colored Men of the State of Ohio...1857,” 323-330.

<sup>146</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, March 4, 1857; Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 324.

<sup>147</sup> See *Appendix to the Journal of the Senate of the State of Ohio* (Columbus, 1857), 528-533.

his constituents.<sup>148</sup> However, for the sake of party unity and under pressure from House leaders, Monroe did not call for the yeas and nays on the passage of the amendment, a tactic he had hoped to use in order to put each member of the House on record.<sup>149</sup> In their censure of Monroe's colleagues (and perhaps as an underhanded chide at Monroe), the *Oberlin Evangelist* prayed "O give us men for rulers, upright and true to their better convictions!"<sup>150</sup> Even more to the point was the drama performed in Oberlin by William Wells Brown in January, 1858, entitled "Experience, or How to Give a Northern Man a Backbone."<sup>151</sup>

### ***"SO UNPARALLELED A JUDICIOUS OUTRAGE"***

The *Oberlin Evangelist* editor could not have known it at the time, but beginning with the Supreme Court's decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* three days after the paper's lament over Monroe's timidity, the faith in the government of Oberlin and much of the North would progressively spiral downward until the certainty of civil war seemed to be upon them. Chief Justice Roger Taney's declaration in his *Dred Scott* opinion that African Americans, whether slave or free, could not be citizens of the United States stunned the cautiously optimistic abolitionists. Moreover, Taney added insult to injury when he asserted that the framers of the Constitution never intended African Americans to enjoy privileges that suggested citizenship and that they had viewed all Blacks as "so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." He also ruled that the Missouri Compromise of 1820 had

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<sup>148</sup> Rokicky, *James Monroe*, 39.

<sup>149</sup> Monroe, "My First Legislative Experience," 128.

<sup>150</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, March 4, 1857.

<sup>151</sup> *Liberator*, January 9, 1857. Brown's play has been lost, but contemporary accounts describe it as a drama that illuminated the disconnect between white Northerners, even progressive ones, and the needs and desires of African Americans, especially slaves. See Charles S. Watson, *The History of Southern Drama* (Lexington, 1997), 145.



been unconstitutional and that Congress had no authority to prohibit slavery in any of the Territories.<sup>152</sup>

Across the North, the response of reformers with Oberlin connections was of a single mind. Amos Dresser declared in a religious meeting that Taney, on behalf of the Court, “wields the sword to oppress the innocent instead of protecting them,” and in doing so subverted the function of civil government and became “the minister of Satan instead of the minister of God.” America, he mourned, was “no longer the citadel of justice, but the defender and sustainer of crime.”<sup>153</sup> Feeling the sting of federal insult even more personally were African Americans, who, like Charles Langston in a letter to Salmon Chase, denounced the decision that he saw as “so gross, so monstrous, so unparalleled a judicial outrage.” Langston wrote that Taney’s judicial opinion “overtaxes our patience, well-nigh extinguishes our hopes, almost goads us into madness.”<sup>154</sup>

However, despite its tremendous symbolic importance, the *Dred Scott* decision would not have the same galvanizing effect on the North as did the Kansas-Nebraska uproar. No other major judicial opinion in American history affected the daily lives of so few people as did *Dred Scott*. It supposedly annulled a law that had been rendered void three years earlier, and denied freedom to slaves in a particular area where there were no slaves. More importantly, the decision, by its very circumstances, did not allow any actual way for its opponents to openly defy it, as did the Fugitive Slave Law. Despite all the controversy, the decision only applied to proposed Republican legislation on slavery extension and the fate of a single man, Dred Scott.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> For a complete analysis of the decision, see Don Edward Fehrenbacher, *Slavery, Law, and Politics: The Dred Scott Case in Historical Perspective* (New York, 1981), 183-213.

<sup>153</sup> Ellwell O. Mead, “History of Plymouth Rock Conference,” in *Papers of the Ohio Church History Society*, Vol.IV, ed. Delvan Leonard (Oberlin, 1893), 37.

<sup>154</sup> Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 324.

<sup>155</sup> Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 290-293.

The Republican Party also could not capitalize on *Dred Scott* as they may have wished because of a severe financial panic that reached full force in mid-1857. As the party in power during the crisis, its representatives were often blamed for the economic woes of their constituents. In Ohio, it did not help that the Republican Treasurer William Gibson had been complicit in the embezzlement of a half a million dollars from the state during the downturn that bankrupted the treasury.<sup>156</sup> Moreover, Democrats took Taney's opinion that the Missouri Compromise of 1820 had been unconstitutional and that Congress did not have the authority to prohibit slavery in the Territories to mean that the key plank of the Republican Party's platform, federally mandated non-extension of slavery, had become a non-issue. Emboldened, proslavery interests basked in their newfound advantage. Though Chase was re-elected to his post as Ohio's governor, his margin of victory was less than one half of one percent of all votes cast, an advantage that some Democrats attributed principally to the illegal voting of mulatto and African American residents of Oberlin.<sup>157</sup> An even more discouraging aspect of the conservative backlash of 1857 for Ohio Republicans was that the results of the state elections threw control of the Ohio legislature back into the hands of the Democratic Party.<sup>158</sup>

Ohio Democrats rightly believed that they now possessed the power to undo the progressive legislation of the last Republican legislature. Besides feeling muscle enough to abrogate all the laws in Ohio that protected African Americans against being kidnapped under the Fugitive Slave Law, Democrats were also rumored to be considering a renewed campaign to bring the notorious Black Laws back into full effect.<sup>159</sup> When Monroe attempted to present a carefully prepared speech in defense

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<sup>156</sup> See Frederick J. Blue, *Salmon P. Chase: A Life in Politics* (Kent, 1987), 115-116.

<sup>157</sup> *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, n.d., in *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, November 7, 1857; Smith, *History of the Republican Party in Ohio*, 74.

<sup>158</sup> Smith, *History of the Republican Party in Ohio*, 74.

<sup>159</sup> *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, December 4, 1858.

of his own 1856 *habeas corpus* bill that was on the chopping block, the conservative majority blocked him from presenting it.<sup>160</sup> When he was given a brief chance to speak against the repeal of the state's "Act to prohibit confinement of fugitives from slavery in the jails of Ohio," Monroe chose his words carefully for maximum force. He unflinchingly declared his adherence to a law higher than the racist authority in Ohio, and vowed that "I will never so far disown my own manhood, as to prostrate myself into a barking quadruped upon the bleeding footsteps of a human brother struggling to be free."<sup>161</sup>

Most troubling for abolitionists in Ohio was the conservative shift in the Republican Party itself. Abolitionists Oliver Brown of Portage County, Elyria's Philemon Bliss, and even Ashtabula's Joshua Giddings were refused renomination to their Congressional seats by local nominating committees.<sup>162</sup> Thomas Corwin, one of the most prominent Republicans in the state, actually endorsed the Fugitive Slave Law in his successful Congressional campaign of 1858.<sup>163</sup> National party leaders like William Seward and John McLean seldom mentioned the Fugitive Slave Law or any other sectional issue outside of their opinions regarding the Territories, and more radical Republicans worried that an "extensive effort" was under way to move the party as far away from "extreme" doctrines as possible so as to appeal to conservatives and Southerners.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, December 4, 1858; Rokicky, *James Monroe*, 44; See Monroe's prepared speech "Speech of Mr. Monroe of Lorain, Upon the Bill to Repeal the Habeas Corpus Act of 1856," RG 30/22, James Monroe papers, Box 27, OCA.

<sup>161</sup> "Speech of Mr. Monroe of Lorain, in the House of representatives, Jan. 12, 1858, on the Bill to Repeal and Act to prohibit the Confinement of Fugitives from Slavery in the Jails of Ohio," RG 30/22, James Monroe papers, RG 30/22, Box 27, OCA.

<sup>162</sup> George Washington Julian, *The Life of Joshua R. Giddings* (Chicago, 1892), 353-356; Stewart, *Joshua R. Giddings*, 259-261; Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 325.

<sup>163</sup> Thomas Corwin, "A Campaign Speech," in Thomas Corwin, *Life and Speeches of Thomas Corwin: Orator, Lawyer, and Statesman*, ed. Josiah Morrow (Cincinnati, 1896), 359-384;

<sup>164</sup> Stewart, *Joshua R. Giddings*, 260.

Despite the hopeful prospects of 1856, antislavery politics was threatening to fulfill the predictions of the most radical abolitionists. Men concerned more with widespread public appeal, consensus, and ambition for office than the emancipation of American slaves seemed to be rising to the top of the Republican Party. From the South, men like South Carolina's James Henry Hammond publicly celebrated what they saw as the antislavery sentiment of the North dying out.<sup>165</sup>

Abolitionists from Oberlin would not give up the struggle; they had worked hard for emancipation from a disadvantage since 1834, and hope did not perish easily among them. In an August 1858 speech celebrating the anniversary of West Indian emancipation, John Langston recalled the long history of the abolitionist struggle, and reminded his audience that despite the gloomy portents, "whenever, wherever Liberty has made a stand against oppression...she has always won the most brilliant, splendid triumphs." Langston extolled giants among men from Moses to Spartacus, Toussaint l'Ouverture, and William Lloyd Garrison who had tried to show the slaveholders of the world right from wrong. Despite the discouraging events of 1857 and 1858, Langston assured his audience that champions would continue to rise. He reminded his listeners that "The anti-slavery movement has always had its representative men; men who have been its advocates, its champions, and its heroes."<sup>166</sup>

Though he could not know it at the time, within six weeks, Langston and a host of others from Oberlin would prove themselves the current heroes of the abolitionist movement. They would revive the sagging antislavery sentiments of the Republican Party, successfully confront the encroachments of the Slave Power like no

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<sup>165</sup> *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, December 4, 1858.

<sup>166</sup> John Mercer Langston, "The World's Anti-Slavery Movement; Its Heroes and Its Triumphs," in *Freedom and Citizenship: Selected Lectures and Addresses of John Mercer Langston, LL.D., U.S. Minister Resident at Haiti* (Washington, D.C., 1883), 45, 57-58.

others had done before, and lay out in detail before the nation the injustice of slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law. Yet they would not do so through any new radical innovation, but rather through a remarkable example of their most concrete method of practical emancipation that they had been practicing since Oberlin's founding—offering passage on the Underground Railroad to a brother “from the House of Bondage.”<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> H.G. Blake to James Monroe, September 6, 1858, RG 30/22, James Monroe papers, Box 1, OCA.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *“That railroad center at which all branches converged”: Oberlin and the Underground Railroad*

“The Underground Railroad  
Is a strange machine;  
It carries many passengers,  
And has never been seen.”<sup>1</sup>

Long after he had retired as Oberlin College’s third president, James Harris Fairchild remembered in his old age that the “irrepressible conflict between freedom and slavery in our land first appeared, in practical form, along the geographical line between free and slave territory.” On one side could be found slaves desperate to escape their bondage. Just across that line was the prospect of freedom, “shadowy and uncertain indeed, but sufficient to excite the hopes of an imaginative and impressible race.”<sup>2</sup> Besides a small handful of slave rebellions in the South, only the operation of the Underground Railroad offered physical resistance to the laws that enslaved men and women. Moreover, resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law encouraged extraordinary fear and rage in the South, and led to the execution of ruthless laws that not only affected African Americans, but also wore away at the rights of white Americans and directly contributed to the outbreak of civil war.<sup>3</sup> Though the “railroad” had existed for decades before Oberlin itself, once the community became a

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<sup>1</sup> “The Underground Railroad,” by Oberlin alumnus John McCarty Simpson, quoted in Seibert, *The Mysteries of Ohio’s Underground Railroads* (Columbus, 1951), 214.

<sup>2</sup> James H. Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad: An Address Delivered for the [Western Reserve Historical] Society in Association Hall, Cleveland, January 24, 1895* (Cleveland, 1895), 91.

<sup>3</sup> Fergus Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America* (New York, 2005), 5-6.

legendary beacon for all freedom seekers, it was, by all accounts, responsible for a great deal of the success of the “underground” phenomenon.

Scholars have long attempted to debunk the myth of the Underground as a well-organized benevolent operation of mostly white heroes and helpless African Americans, but the legend has died slowly, especially outside of academia.<sup>4</sup> Also contributing to a general misunderstanding are well-documented cases of extraordinary episodes, such as the cunning escapes of Henry Box Brown or William and Ellen Craft.<sup>5</sup> Despite modern attempts to claim the Underground romance, the history of the Oberlin community, to a large extent, conforms to its exceptional billing. To be sure, there are some accounts of Oberlin’s branch of the Underground Railroad that are too vague or clichéd to be completely believed, yet there are perhaps even more firsthand accounts that are easily verified by multiple sources.<sup>6</sup> Even those various thinly documented stories in which very similar elements or details appear, the kernel of truth they contain informs the tales with more solid backing.

The most common confirmations of the lively Oberlin Underground are simple comments like that of Hiram Wilson to Oberlin treasurer Hamilton Hill in 1848:

“Those six fugitives who were in Oberlin when we left all got over safe into Canada

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<sup>4</sup> Especially in Oberlin, a town famous for its involvement, the desire to celebrate the myth is strong. Oberlin professor Geoffrey Blodgett has noted several houses in Oberlin that are claimed by some modern residents to have been used as Underground Railroad hiding places, but were actually built after the Civil War, including one constructed as late as 1885. Geoffrey Blodgett, “Myth and Reality in Oberlin History,” in *Oberlin History* (Oberlin, 2005), 8. See also Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 103-104; Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington, 1961), *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> See Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan*, 3-8; Carol Lasser, “The Underground Railroad in Oberlin History and Memory,” a paper presented at “Threads of Freedom: The Underground Railroad Story in Quilts,” June 23, 2001, [http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/UndergroundRR/Lasser\\_speech.htm](http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/UndergroundRR/Lasser_speech.htm) (accessed June 16, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> This seems to have been a concern of antebellum Oberlinites. One particular episode in 1841 is instructive. After an Oberlin resident and self emancipated slave was kidnapped and then rescued, theological student Samuel D. Cochran wrote an account of the incident for publication in the Cincinnati *Philanthropist*. Fearing that even his status as a seminarian would not convince some critics of the story’s truthfulness, he solicited the testimony of five prominent Oberlinites and professors as “to the correctness” of his account. See Samuel D. Cochran to Gamaliel Bailey, February 27, 1841, in *Philanthropist*, March 24, 1841. (More sources are cited in the discussion to follow.)

by the next Monday.”<sup>7</sup> Another five “travelers” presented Professors James Monroe and H.E. Peck with a succinct note from a Medina man who told them “Gents, here are five Slaves from the House of Bondage, which I need not say to you that you will see to them—they can tell their own story.”<sup>8</sup> Their “own story,” it seems, was not recorded for posterity, nor were those of countless others who passed through Oberlin under similar circumstances.<sup>9</sup> These brief allusions offer no details regarding the escaping slaves themselves or exactly what events marked their passage through Oberlin. They do, however, confirm Oberlin as a busy depot on the “Liberty Line,” and silently vouch for the more exceptional cases and remarkable circumstances that follow in this chapter. Perhaps more than any other episode in the antislavery history of the Oberlin community, the involvement of its townspeople in the Underground Railroad demonstrated its fundamentally practical and independent approach to abolitionism, as well as the vital importance of African Americans in the great freedom struggle.

### **“THE HIGHER LAW”**

One early historian of Oberlin suggests that, at least with regards to fugitive slave laws, the town was in a practical state of rebellion against the national government after 1850.<sup>10</sup> The provisions of the 1850 law required all citizens to aid

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<sup>7</sup> Hiram Wilson to Hamilton Hill, September 11, 1848, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 12, Oberlin College Archives (hereafter OCA).

<sup>8</sup> H.G. Blake to James Monroe and H.E. Peck, September 6, 1858, RG 30/22, James Monroe papers, Box 1, OCA.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Charles Stearns to William Lloyd Garrison, April 25, 1841, in *Liberator*, June 18, 1841; Hiram Wilson to “Brother Hough,” September 13, 1841, in *Friend of Man*, October 19, 1841; Hiram Wilson to Hamilton Hill, February 7, 1853, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 12, OCA; Lewis Garrard Clarke and Milton Clarke, *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke: Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution, During a Captivity of More than Twenty Years Among the Slaveholders of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of North America* (Boston, 1846), 86; *Emancipator and Free American*, October 6, 1842; *Cleveland True Democrat*, November 8, 1851.

<sup>10</sup> Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College from its Foundation Through the Civil War*, Vol.I (Oberlin, 1943), 399.



federal marshals in the recapture of alleged fugitives, yet many Oberlinites publicly showed themselves to be in open defiance of the bill. Of course, these men and women had been on record for their opposition longer than almost any other Americans, since they had been subjected to the restrictions of an Ohio fugitive law twelve years earlier. As he had regarding that Ohio bill, Charles Grandison Finney refused even to justify the 1850 federal enactment by calling it a fugitive slave *law*. To him, it must remain “the Fugitive Slave Bill,” because “he could not call it a *law*, for he did not believe it was a law.”<sup>11</sup> The only fugitive slave law worth obeying, most Oberlinites agreed, was God’s “Higher Law” of justice and righteousness that they had maintained since the 1830s: “Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee; he shall dwell with thee, even among you, in that place which he shall choose...thou shalt not oppress him.”<sup>12</sup>

Most Oberlinites, especially its Black residents, construed the Mosaic Law in a positive sense, and vowed not only to avoid oppression, but to actively assist every escaping slave and protect him “by all justifiable means” in their power.<sup>13</sup> As African Americans traveled the perilous route of the North Star through northwestern Ohio, the “assistance” from many in the Oberlin community took many forms. Throughout the antebellum history of the Oberlin community, the combined efforts of the absconders and their abolitionist protectors always resulted in the completion of another leg of the former slave’s journey closer to freedom, without a single exception.

Help could even take the form of truthful answers to slave catcher’s prying questions. Abolitionists in the Oberlin community were skilled in the arts of

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<sup>11</sup> *The Annual Report of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, Presented at New York, May 6, 1851; With the Addresses and Resolutions* (New York, 1851), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Deut. 23:15-16 in *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 11, 1859.

<sup>13</sup> *The North Star*, October 24, 1850.

obfuscation. If accosted by a suspected kidnapper, some were accustomed to silently listen to the man recount his entire tale and legal case, then turn just as silently and walk away after the Southerner had spent his energy. It was also possible for the Christians of Oberlin to throw off the trail of a slaveholder's agent without resorting to lies. James Fairchild recalled the story of one man who was approached just outside of Oberlin and asked by a shady looking stranger if he had seen any "fugitives" pass by his house recently. "Yes," the man answered, to which the slave hunter asked "Which way was he going?" The man told him that he saw the man in question head north towards Oberlin, and the pursuer quickly took off in that direction. He did not feel the need to also tell him that he had seen the man heading back away from Oberlin earlier that same day.<sup>14</sup>

Most often, the assistance rendered a fugitive slave by Oberlinites took a much more tangible form. The most direct method was for an abolitionist to venture into a slaveholding state and, as Southerners called it, "entice" enslaved men and women to leave their owners and seek freedom in the North.<sup>15</sup> However, not everyone in Oberlin approved of such audacious efforts to help slaves escape. Even some of the most famous Underground conductors in the West disclaimed any intent of extending the Railroad into the South. Indiana Quaker Levi Coffin told Southerners that "I was and always had been opposed to slavery, but it was no part of my business, in the South, to interfere with their laws or their slaves."<sup>16</sup> James Fairchild discouraged the practice because it involved "too much risk" to everyone involved.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 96-97.

<sup>15</sup> See Calvin Fairbank, *Rev. Calvin Fairbank During Slavery Time: How He Fought the Good Fight to Prepare the Way* (Chicago, 1890), 158.

<sup>16</sup> Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, The Reputed president of the Underground Railroad* (Cincinnati, 1880), 279.

<sup>17</sup> Fairchild explained that such a view was "not so much because of any supposed right on the part of the master to the services of his slave," but because "it would be a reckless undertaking, involving too much risk, and probably doing more harm than good." James H. Fairchild, *Oberlin, the Colony and the College, 1833-1883* (Oberlin, 1883), 115; See also Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 99.

Still, there were many in Oberlin who were willing to risk everything so that a slave might have a chance at freedom. These men and women “expected no mercy in case of detection,” and entered into their plans fully aware that “Nothing but bitter hatred awaited them, and the state prison was their only hope of escape from lynching.”<sup>18</sup> These were the abolitionists who earned the greatest respect from Oberlin’s African American population, many of whom were also frequent “enticers” in the South themselves. When the Rev. Charles Torrey died in a Maryland prison in 1846, imprisoned for attempting to help a group of slaves northward, Oberlin African Americans held a mass gathering, passed resolutions, and praised the “martyr” for obeying “the dictates which he believed reason and reason’s God had given him” in helping his fellow men escape to freedom, and by showing his “true devotion to the cause of down-trodden humanity.”<sup>19</sup>

Calvin Fairbank and Delia Webster were both Oberlin students in the early 1840s, and were also committed abolitionists who pursued all available means for practical emancipation, including going into the South to help slaves escape their bonds. Between 1837 and 1844, Fairbank claimed to have helped liberate forty-four slaves “from hell.”<sup>20</sup> In August of 1844, a slave man named Gilson Berry who had escaped from Kentucky arrived in Oberlin, and he approached Fairbank with plans to venture back to free his wife and children from slavery. They decided that it would be too dangerous for the former slave to again set foot in Kentucky, but later that month, Fairbank set out to bring back the Berry family.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 99-100.

<sup>19</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, June 17, 1846; *Liberator*, July 10, 1846. See also Sally Holley to Carolina Putnam, November 25, 1849, in Holley, *A Life for Liberty*, 66. For more on Torrey, see Charles T. Torrey, *Memoir of Rev. Charles T. Torrey Who Died in the Penitentiary of Maryland: Where he was Confined for Showing Mercy to the Poor* (Boston, 1847).

<sup>20</sup> Fairbank, *Rev. Calvin Fairbank*, 149

<sup>21</sup> Calvin Fairbank, “Memoir of Calvin Fairbank,” in Coffin, *Reminiscences*, 719.



**Illustration 9.1: Calvin Fairbank**  
(from Fairbank, *The Rev. Calvin Fairbank During Slavery Time* (1890))

Once in Lexington, Kentucky, however, Fairbank discovered that he could not succeed in rescuing the family he had come south to liberate. Nonetheless, he soon learned that fellow Oberlinite Delia Webster was also teaching in the area. Together the two made the acquaintance of an enslaved man named Lewis Hayden, who desired his freedom, he bluntly told them, “Because I am a man.”<sup>22</sup> Late on the night of September 28, Fairbank and Webster met Hayden and his family near the home of abolitionist Cassius Clay, and set off for Ohio. At nine o’clock the next morning, the group crossed the Ohio River into Ripley, where Fairbank transferred care of the Haydens into the hands of another Underground conductor. The newly-free couple

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<sup>22</sup> Fairbank, *Rev. Calvin Fairbank*, 46.

would soon reach Canada, before returning to the United States as antislavery lecturers for the American Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>23</sup>

However, the Haydens' legal owner had learned the details of the escape from two slaves who had recognized Fairbank in Millersburg, Kentucky. When Fairbank and Webster returned to renew their attempt to rescue Berry's family, the two Oberlinites were apprehended and jailed. Besides the slaves' statement, the only evidence used against the two was a single letter found in Fairbank's possession mysteriously addressed only to "Frater" in Oberlin.<sup>24</sup> Though Webster was "humanely" incarcerated, Fairbank was shackled with twenty-four pounds of irons and forced to sleep on the floor of the jail until their trials in January of 1845. At that time, the rescuers were tried separately and both found guilty. Webster was sentenced to a prison term of two years, but Fairbank's guilty plea, despite his appeal for "an abatement on the ground of conscientious convictions of duty," resulted in a sentence of fifteen years in a Kentucky penitentiary.<sup>25</sup>

Webster was soon pardoned and sent back to her home state of Vermont. Fairbank, however, remained imprisoned for more than five years, despite the "strenuous efforts" of his friends and sympathizers to have him set free. This included his father who died of cholera while visiting Lexington.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, when he was finally released in 1851, one of Fairbank's first acts was to return for the rescue of a slave woman named Tamar, whom he successfully helped along the Underground Railroad north. Again, Fairbank was betrayed. This time Kentucky vigilantes

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<sup>23</sup> Fairbank, "Memoir of Calvin Fairbank," 719-20; Fairbank, *Rev. Calvin Fairbank*, 45-49; On Lewis Hayden, See Joel Strangis, *Lewis Hayden and the War Against Slavery* (North Haven, CT, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Fairbank, *Rev. Calvin Fairbank*, 49.

<sup>25</sup> Fairbank, "Memoir of Calvin Fairbank," 720-721; Fairbank, *Rev. Calvin Fairbank*, 51-53.

<sup>26</sup> Fairbank, "Memoir of Calvin Fairbank," 721; Webster was arrested again in 1854 for "enticing slaves to seek 'the land of the free'" but was acquitted of all charges. See *New York Times*, May 1, July 12, 1854.

kidnapped him from Ohio and brought him back into their state for prosecution. An angry judge again sentenced Fairbank to fifteen years at hard labor.<sup>27</sup>

This time, pardon would not be swift in coming. Despite great publicity in the abolitionist press, Fairbank's appeals were ignored.<sup>28</sup> He was put to work weaving hemp and making barrels, and sometimes denied vegetable food so long that he was forced to eat grass and weeds from the prison yard. Occasionally he would be lashed to a chair and flogged with a leather strap by prison guards for no reason. Fairbank tallied 35,105 "stripes laid on" during his term.<sup>29</sup> Only after thirteen years of prison abuse and poor health was Fairbank pardoned by the Lieutenant Governor of Kentucky, a year before the end of the Civil War.<sup>30</sup>

Oberlin theological graduate George Thompson also spent nearly five years in a Missouri jail after being found guilty of "grand larceny" for attempting to help two slaves escape into Illinois in 1841.<sup>31</sup> Though no laws were actually broken, and though Thompson and two other men had been unsuccessful in their rescue attempt, they were each sentenced to twelve years' imprisonment. Nonetheless, Thompson offered to have the sentence of another rescuer added to his own if the man would be pardoned. His request was not granted, though as the alleged "ringleader" in the affair, Thompson was held in prison longer than any of his collaborators to warn all the other abolitionists "not to dally with [Missouri's] slaves."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Fairbank, "Memoir of Calvin Fairbank," 722.

<sup>28</sup> See *Liberator*, March 5, 12, April 16, 1852, December 29, 1854, July 20, 1855; *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, February 26, March 5, 1852, December 15, 1854, May 25, 1855, July 27, 1855.

<sup>29</sup> Fairbank, *Rev. Calvin Fairbank*, 11, 149.

<sup>30</sup> Fairbank, "Memoir of Calvin Fairbank," 725; Fairbank, *Rev. Calvin Fairbank*, 161; *Liberator*, May 6, 1864.

<sup>31</sup> See Harriet C. Frazier, *Runaway and Freed Missouri Slaves and Those Who Helped Them, 1763-1865* (Jefferson, NC, 2004), 161.

<sup>32</sup> George Thompson to Editor, July 14, 1879, *Cleveland Leader*, n.d., in *New York Times*, July 28, 1879; See also George Thompson, *Prison Life and Recollections, or, A Narrative of the Arrest, Trial, Conviction, Imprisonment, Treatment, Observations, Reflections, and Deliverance of Work, Burr, and Thompson, Who Suffered an Unjust and Cruel Imprisonment in Missouri Penitentiary, for Attempting to Aid Some Slaves to Liberty* (Hartford, 1847).

Professor James Thome had been born into a slaveholding Kentucky family, and even after he became a dedicated abolitionist and convinced his father to emancipate his slaves, he continued to regularly visit his Southern family when his duties at Oberlin allowed it. On one such trip, Thome was apprised of the situation of an enslaved woman, who, having been promised her freedom, discovered that she was to be sold away before the promised arrangement was completed. After she fled to a safe house in Augusta, Kentucky, a group of free African American women sought out the known abolitionist Thome to lay her situation before him. Immediately, Thome urged the woman to make her escape across the Ohio River into Ohio, and then to push for Canada. He became increasingly interested in her plight, and after “much prayer and pondering,” helped plan her escape by which she ultimately gained her freedom.<sup>33</sup>

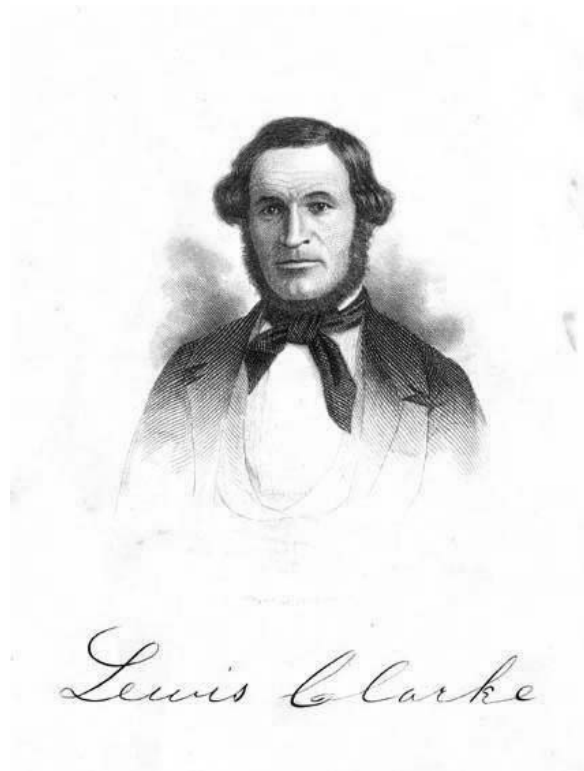
Back in Oberlin, Thome took the occasion of a monthly concert of prayer for the slave to mention a few particulars concerning Tamar’s escape and his role in it. He felt completely safe with his remarks, since the gathering was among a trusted group, “the tried friends of the slave.” However, one student at the meeting wrote of the incident to his family in Boston, and somehow the letter was intercepted and its contents were published in a New England newspaper. Word soon reached Augusta of Thome’s actions. His sister wrote him that the town “was in a blaze of excitement,” and that if the slaveholders could get their hands on him, he would undoubtedly be jailed. Thome’s father warned his son to constantly be on his guard, lest he be seized in Ohio and dragged away into Kentucky.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, August 27, 1839, in *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld, and Sarah Grimké, 1822-1844*, Vol.I, ed. Gilbert Barnes and Dwight Dumond (New York, 1934), 793-795.

<sup>34</sup> James A. Thome to Theodore Dwight Weld, August 27, 1839, in *Weld Letters*, I:793-795, See also James H. Fairchild to Mary Kellogg, August 24, 1839, RG 30/24, FP, Box 5, Folder 13, OCA; James A. Thome to Gerrit Smith, RG 30/24, FP, Box 9, Folder 11, OCA.

For self-emancipated men and women, the threat of being “dragged away” into the South was an even more frightening possibility. However, they were some of Oberlin’s boldest Underground conductors, and their forays into the South were legendary. Lewis and Milton Clarke were two Kentucky brothers who had escaped from slavery and settled in Oberlin. Both were active in the operation of the Railroad through the town. Lewis, despite his fear of “creeping round day and night...in a den of lions,” was determined to return to Kentucky to help another brother, Cyrus, to freedom as well.<sup>35</sup>



**Illustration 9.2: Lewis Clarke**  
(from Clarke and Clarke, *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke* (1846))

Armed only with twenty dollars and a crude map, Lewis set out to rescue his brother. When he crossed the Ohio River into Kentucky, the realization that he was

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<sup>35</sup> Clarke and Clarke, *Narratives*, 48; Ascott R. Hope, *Heroes in Homespun: Scenes and Stories from the American Emancipation Movement* (London, 1894), 182-183.



once again on slave soil made him tremble and burst into tears. Eventually, he was able to continue into “the lion’s jaws,” and his light complexion allowed him to travel with relative ease among the Kentuckians. One of these men even engaged him in a conversation about runaway slaves.

After Lewis found his young brother, however, the return journey was much more difficult. Though his education in Oberlin’s primary school allowed him to read road signs, the way had to be made away from roads and on foot, and the fierce summer storms made the way nearly impassible. Moreover, Cyrus grew so fatigued that he began to see lions of his own in hallucinations. Only Lewis’ constant urging kept the pair moving along. Cyrus agreed with his brother that freedom was wonderful, but complained to Lewis that “this is a *hard, h-a-r-d* way to get it.”<sup>36</sup>

Even in Ohio, Cyrus’ fear and deep mistrust of whites forced the Clarkes to sleep outdoors or in barns as they made their way from Underground depot to Underground depot. He could not bring himself to trust white benefactors after being mistreated by slaveholders his entire life, and remained convinced that the hospitality offered him by beneficent whites was fraught with treachery. Though Milton and Lewis remained in Oberlin for some time after the rescue, Cyrus still did not feel safe until he reached Canada, and he was soon sent on to a friendly captain at Lake Erie.<sup>37</sup>

### **“A CITY OF REFUGE”**

However, as George W. Julian, a close ally of many in the Oberlin community, remarked, the great majority of escapes by slaves from the South were “promoted by other causes than northern interference.”<sup>38</sup> Usually, only after making the most treacherous leg of the journey on their own were self-emancipating bondsmen assisted

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<sup>36</sup> Clarke and Clarke, *Narratives*, 49, 53-55; Hope, *Heroes in Homespun*, 183-184.

<sup>37</sup> Clarke and Clarke, *Narratives*, 55-59; Hope, *Heroes in Homespun*, 185.

<sup>38</sup> Gara, *The Liberty Line*, 82.

by white abolitionists or free Northern African Americans. Almost from the minute “Oberlin” became a name that was known beyond the physical boundaries of the town as friendly to slaves, the town became a beacon for freedom-seeking former bondsmen. Both friends and foes alike realized this fact, and as abolitionists across the region directed pilgrims towards Oberlin, enemies mockingly littered the roads leading to the town with signs like one cartoonish marker that depicted “a negro running with all his might to reach the place.” A tavern keeper in a neighboring town hung out a sign, “on the Oberlin side...ornamented by the representation of a panting negro, pursued by a tiger.”<sup>39</sup>

Most critics generally had little better to say of Oberlin’s involvement in the Underground Railroad than one Ohio judge who described the town as “that old buzzards’ nest where the negroes who arrive over the underground railroad are regarded as dear children.”<sup>40</sup> In the crusade to repeal the college’s charter, the most potentially damning evidence an anti-abolitionist thought that he could offer was proof of the school and town’s assistance to escaping slaves.<sup>41</sup> Even worse for other critics was the widespread belief that an Underground Railroad station could be located wherever an Oberlin College graduate settled.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Oberlin College’s Theological department filled the pulpits of a large number of churches in northern Ohio and beyond. Most of these men (and woman) remained true to their preparation at the “activist training school” in Oberlin, including the dictates to assist those fleeing

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<sup>39</sup> E.H. Fairchild, *Historical Sketch of Oberlin College* (Oberlin, 1868), 9; See also Caroline H. Dall, *The College, the Market, and the Court: or, Woman's Relation to Education, Labor and Law* (Boston, 1867), 384-385.

<sup>40</sup> *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, Ed. Jacob R. Shipherd (Boston, 1859), 166.

<sup>41</sup> See *Ohio Statesman*, December 10, 1841, February 9, 1842; *Journal of the Senate of the State of Ohio, at the First Session of the Thirty-Eighth General Assembly Held in the City of Columbus and Commencing Monday, December 2, 1839* (Columbus, 1839), 566-572; *Philanthropist*, February 25, 1840; Josiah Harris to “Wife,” Thanksgiving A.M., 1842, in Fairchild, *Oberlin*, “Appendix,” 368-370.

<sup>42</sup> Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom’s Ferment: Phases of American Social History to 1860* (Minneapolis, 1944), 529; Wilbur Henry Seibert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1898), 32-33, 98.

from bondage and to encourage others to do so as well.<sup>43</sup> Even as missionaries to Kansas in the mid 1850s, Oberlin alumni would put their underground skills to productive use. Although she had only recently given birth, Florella Brown Adair and her husband Samuel opened their home on Christmas Eve in 1858 to her brother John Brown and eleven former slaves that he had helped liberate from their Missouri bonds.<sup>44</sup> John Byrd too was a man notorious among proslavery emigrants for his role in the Kansas underground. Byrd once entered a hotel in Atchison in broad daylight and rescued an enslaved woman and her child awaiting passage to the South. Though there were several eyewitnesses to the rescue, and though the master brought suit against him for the “theft,” Byrd would only admit with a smile that “it appears that underground railroad traffic in territorial slaves is a legitimate business.”<sup>45</sup>

In the town of Oberlin itself, residents’ involvement in the Underground Railroad commenced not long after the community was founded. In an 1835 letter, John J. Shipherd urged a correspondent to protect escaping slaves “by *all* means.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See John Todd to Margaret Strohm, February 21, 1842, RG 21, Oberlin File, Letters, Box 1, OCA; Roland Baumann, *The 1858 Oberlin-Wellington Rescue: A Reappraisal* (Oberlin, 2003), 7; Douglas M. Strong, *Perfectionist Politics: Abolitionism and the Religious Tensions of American Democracy* (Syracuse, 1999), 25; Siebert, *Underground Railroad*, 260; *The Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, Vol. VI, No. 10 (July, 1910), 462; G. Frederick Wright, *A Standard History of Lorain County Ohio*, Vol. I (Chicago, 1919), 148-150; Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 76; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 86-87, 146, 189. Antoinette Brown finished the theological course in 1852, but the faculty did not ordain her nor did they consider her a full theological student in the same way as they did her male counterparts. Nonetheless, she was ordained in South Butler, New York in 1853 and assumed a pastorate there. Abolitionist Luther Lee of Syracuse preached the ordination sermon, and Gerrit Smith made an address as well. See Luther Lee, “Woman’s Right to Preach the Gospel: A Sermon Preached at the Ordination of the Rev. Miss Antoinette L. Brown,” (Syracuse, 1853); *Maple Heights Press*, June 10, 1859; *Circleville Ohio Herald*, June 9, 1859; *Oberlin News*, November 11, 1921; *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, November 6, 1921; *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, August 16 1922; Antoinette Brown to Gerrit Smith, December 26, 1851, August 16, 23, 1853, RG 30/24, Box 9, Folder 11, OCA

<sup>44</sup> Betty Deramus, *Freedom by Any Means: Con Games, Voodoo Schemes, True Love, and Lawsuits on the Underground Railroad* (New York, 2009), 100. Florella Brown Adair would have undoubtedly felt a degree of sympathy for one of the slaves named Jane, who had also just given birth to a child in the midst of a war zone.

<sup>45</sup> John Byrd to Simeon Jocelyn, December 27, 1859, American Missionary Association archives, Kansas, microfilm roll 1.

<sup>46</sup> John J. Shipherd to Fayette Shipherd, September 30, 1835, RG 30/83, John J. Shipherd papers, Box 4, OCA.

The first definite mention of the involvement of members of the Oberlin community with the Underground Railroad is in the autumn of 1836. An African American man named Williams appeared in Oberlin, met with the principle abolitionists of the community, and unveiled to them his plan for enticing slaves to desert their masters and seek freedom in Canada. Williams admitted that he had nearly been captured by Southern authorities in his last venture, and was forced to abandon his wagon and team to save himself. It is possible that this man Williams was simply a con man hoping to draw upon the generosity of a notorious abolitionist stronghold, yet if his words were true, he had already directed several escaping slaves to Oberlin. Moreover, he claimed to have been assisted at least once by an unnamed Black accomplice who was a member of the Sheffield Institution, the Oberlin manual labor satellite school. Together, the men had succeeded in helping to liberate fourteen slaves from a single plantation.<sup>47</sup>

It is unlikely that the faculty would have officially supported such a risky plan of action, but Williams is also reported to have addressed his scheme to the student dining hall. There, he raised fifty dollars to equip his venture.<sup>48</sup> Later, when several students took jobs teaching in African American schools in southern Ohio, it was suggested that one of the primary reasons they did so was to act on Williams' plan and spirit slaves out of Kentucky and onto free soil. The first fruit of their efforts, "a tall

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<sup>47</sup> It is possible that this unnamed assistant from the Sheffield school was either former Lane Rebel James Bradley, or Charles or Gideon Langston, brothers of John Mercer Langston and abolitionists in their own right. Delazon Smith, *Oberlin Unmasked* (Cleveland, 1837), 60-61; *Journal of the Senate of the State of Ohio... 1839-1840*, 566-572. In Sheffield, Williams would have also encountered Jabez Burrell, one of John J. Shipherd's first pupils before Oberlin's founding (and later Oberlin trustee), who had been entrusted with the establishment of the Sheffield Manual Labor Institute. There, the Burrell family were busy Underground conductors. Jabez, Jr. regularly sent escaping slaves from Oberlin to Sheffield, and besides the father, other Burrell sons Robbins and Edward would feed and conceal these men and women at the Sheffield farm until notified of the arrival of friendly vessels in nearby Lorain. Under the cover of produce, the Burrells would deliver "wagon-loads of pilgrims" to these ships. See Siebert, *Mysteries of Ohio's Underground Railroads*, 260; *The Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, Vol. VI, No. 10 (July, 1910), 462; G. Frederick Wright, *A Standard History of Lorain County Ohio*, Vol. I (Chicago, 1919), 148-150; Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 76; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 86-87, 146, 189.

<sup>48</sup> See Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 115; Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 99.

athletic negro,” arrived in Oberlin in the winter of 1836, and was secreted in the college-owned Palmer House until he could continue his journey to Detroit and then Canada. Several other slaves arrived soon thereafter, and were boarded with the family of Asa Mahan.<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps before the Mahans’ guests had left Oberlin, another group of former slaves arrived in town, this time in a wagon driven by Martin Brooks, one of the student-teachers who had spent some time teaching African American students in the southern part of the state.<sup>50</sup> As his wagon drew near, the cry went out from all directions, “brethren another *full load* of colored brethren have arrived.”<sup>51</sup> News of the arrival quickly spread across campus, and hordes of students rushed to the common hall to meet their new guests. There, the guests were treated to a special feast, and nearly everyone present jockeyed for a prime position to engage them in some conversation. After they rested in Oberlin for some time, the travelers set out again on May 1, 1837 as a crowd of Oberlinites including Mahan, the students, and many colonists gathered to see them off. Several male students armed themselves and accompanied the group to their next destination.<sup>52</sup> From that point, the arrival in town of refugees “from the house of bondage” was a common occurrence.<sup>53</sup>

However, there were never as many African Americans resident in Oberlin as outsiders may have imagined, though many of those who were there had taken

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<sup>49</sup> Smith, *Oberlin Unmasked*, 62-63.

<sup>50</sup> Brooks was one of the first Oberlin students to enroll in 1833. He reportedly gave the first abolitionist speech in Oberlin on July 4, 1833. See William Richard Cutter, *New England Families, Genealogical and Memorial: A Record of the Achievements of Her People in the Making of Commonwealths and the Founding of a Nation*, Vol. I (New York, 1914), 222.

<sup>51</sup> Smith, *Oberlin Unmasked*, 63; Nancy Prudden to George Prudden, May 16, 1837, RG 30/205, Prudden family papers, Box 1, OCA.

<sup>52</sup> Smith, *Oberlin Unmasked*, 64-65; See also Nancy Prudden to George Prudden, May 16, 1837, RG 30/205, Prudden family papers, Box 1, OCA; *Journal of the Senate of the State of Ohio... 1839-1840*, 566-572.

<sup>53</sup> Smith, *Oberlin Unmasked*, 66; See also Henry Field James, *Abolitionism Unveiled: or, its Origin, Progress, and Pernicious Tendency Fully Developed* (Cincinnati, 1856), 139, 168. Recall, also, that when Hiram Wilson left Oberlin for Canada in 1836, his traveling companion was a self-emancipated slave from Virginia.

residence after escape from bondage. Professor Amasa Walker noted in 1843 that Oberlin was home to but forty African American men. Still, he also stated that more than twenty members of the Liberty School were “fugitives,” suggesting that many, if not most African Americans in Oberlin were self-emancipated.<sup>54</sup> When John Mercer Langston arrived in Oberlin in 1844, he remarked that the “major part of the colored persons residing in Oberlin at this time were fugitive slaves.”<sup>55</sup>

It seemed that just about everyone the community was willing and able to welcome escaping slaves into their homes or give them assistance in some way. This was exceptional for any town in America, even the North, where friends of the slave were a small minority. In Oberlin, however, the tables were turned, and proslavery men and women found little company among the united throng of abolitionists. Oberlinites prided themselves on the widespread belief that “No man in Oberlin could be trusted on the slave question.” An old Southerner once told an Oberlin alumnus that “no matter how pious or reliable Oberlinites might be in other matters, they would be ‘like horse thieves when it came to a nigger.’” To betray a slave attempting to claim his or her freedom “would have been to lose the respect of the community, and insure lasting disgrace and odium.”<sup>56</sup>

Russia township funds were regularly allocated “for boarding a poor stranger,” medical “services to Tr[ansient] poor,” or simply for the care of “transient paupers.” These vague expenditures were especially common after John Mercer Langston was elected Township Clerk in 1857.<sup>57</sup> The Oberlin Maternal Association, Female Anti-

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<sup>54</sup> See speech of Amasa Walker in *Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention, Called by the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, and Held in London, From Tuesday, June 13, to Tuesday, June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1843* (London, 1843), 206-207.

<sup>55</sup> John Mercer Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capital* (Hartford, 1894), 101-102.

<sup>56</sup> *Oberliniana: A Jubilee Volume of Semi-Historical Anecdotes Connected with the Past and Present of Oberlin College, 1833-1883*, ed. Arthur Leon Shumway and C. DeW. Brower (Cleveland, 1883), 22; See also James, *Abolitionism Unveiled*, 169; Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 184.

<sup>57</sup> See “Russia Township Records, 1855-1869,” RG 30/24, FP, Box 13, OCA.

Slavery Society, Young Ladies' Literary Society, and Female Moral Reform Society all collected and distributed funds specifically earmarked for "fugitives," and the college's Prudential Committee also kept a special "Fund for Fugitives."<sup>58</sup> The town earned the confidence of some of the most famous Underground conductors in the Northwest. Levi Coffin, denounced by critics as a "notorious nigger thief" and praised by admirers as the "president of the Underground Railroad" was a regular visitor to Oberlin, and quite often, his business in town was to accompany escaping slaves from his home territory of Indiana into the trusted hands of some "reliable and trustworthy gentleman" in Oberlin.<sup>59</sup>

Oberlin residents often prepared baskets of food, and left them scattered across the surrounding countryside for escaping slaves, telling inquisitive children that the food was for "the rabbits." However, when young William Cochrane accompanied his parents once to retrieve one such basket, he was surprised to observe that the rabbits had "folded their napkins."<sup>60</sup> Moreover, Oberlin residents donated even larger quantities of goods and supplies to other known stops all along the Underground Railroad, especially depots in Canada overseen by Oberlin alumni like Hiram Wilson and other close friends. Barrels arriving from Oberlin for the benefit of former slaves might include school books, clothing, bedding, cash donations, or any assortment of items meant to ease their entry into freedom.<sup>61</sup> Abolitionists from as far away as Wisconsin sent money directly to Oberlin professors to be used in such a manner "that

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<sup>58</sup> *Advocate of Moral Reform and Family Guardian*, June 15, 1855; "Annual Report of the L.L.S.," *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 15, 1855; Herman Birch to Leroy Burnell, January 30, 1840, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 6, OCA, and James Matthews to E.W. Hubbard, January 17, 1840, and Hubbard's reply of January 27, 1840, RG 16/5/3, Autograph File, Box 3, Folder 126, OCA; Catherine M. Rokicky, "Lydia Finney and Evangelical Womanhood," *Ohio History*, 103 (Summer/Autumn, 1994), 184-185; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 397.

<sup>59</sup> Coffin, *Reminiscences*, 187, 334-5, 541.

<sup>60</sup> Conversation between William E. Bigglestone and Mary R. Cochrane, November 8, 1972, "Underground Railroad" subject file, OCA.

<sup>61</sup> See *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 17, October 13, November 8, 11, 1847.

the fugitives will be benefited.” One such man from Wisconsin sent money to Henry Cowles, writing “I do not know where to send it better than to send it to you.”<sup>62</sup>

Nearly the whole community went out of its way to assist passers-through in any way they could. In March of 1853, a mother with eight children arrived in Oberlin. Six of the children were her own, and one was her grandchild. All were born in slavery. The youngest babe had been entrusted into her care two years earlier by its own mother, a dying slave woman in the South. By the time they reached Oberlin, it was clear that “Heaven was already making out [the child’s] free papers.” It was quickly ascertained that her former master, the father of the sick child, was hot on her footsteps, and an Oberlin woman offered to take the baby and “nurture him as carefully as if he were [her] own.” She promised to bring the child to the woman in Canada if he survived, or alternatively to make sure the child received a proper Christian burial if he did not. Overcome with gratitude, the mother accepted the offer and quickly continued north with her other children.<sup>63</sup>

The child survived another nine days, but eventually succumbed to his illness. Though they were prepared for his death, the boy’s sad fate grieved the Oberlin community; his was a useless loss brought about by the iniquities of slavery. A small coffin was specially made for the child, and Oberlin’s First Church was filled with over 1,000 people who came to honor him. Rev. H.E. Peck preached a sermon that both eulogized the innocent child and rebuked the Slave Power that extinguished his life. Congregants pondered the horrible system that denied thousands of other babies an “earthly father, save such as would chase down and sell them for the gold-value of their bones and muscles,” and “how this same system tears away from its babes the

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<sup>62</sup> E.S. Cadwell to Henry Cowles, April 19, 1851, RG 30/27, Henry Cowles papers, Box 3, OCA.

<sup>63</sup> A.A.F. Johnson, “Significant Events and Noted Persons,” *The Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, Vol. VI, No.2 (November, 1909), 54-55.



mothers God gave and dooms them to more than orphanage—orphantage among human flesh-mongers!”<sup>64</sup>

At the close of the service, the casket was opened, and every man, woman, and child in the community passed by it and “swore between clinched teeth,” to recommit themselves to emancipation on an even higher level. The Oberlin student body took up a collection that was used to purchase a monument in Westwood cemetery. Its inscription reads “Let Slavery perish! Lee Howard Dobbins, a fugitive slave orphan, brought here by the adopted mother in her flight for liberty, March 17<sup>th</sup>, 1853. Left here, wasted with consumption, found a refuge in death March 26<sup>th</sup>, 1853. Aged 4 years.”<sup>65</sup>

#### **“SLAVE-HOLDERS IN TOWN!”**

The pursuit of the Dobbins family was not unusual. There were almost always slaveholders pursuing their fugitive property as they fled north. In 1840, seven self-emancipated men and women reached Oberlin just minutes before the slave-catchers who were in hot pursuit. The slave owner’s agents quickly determined in which house their human prey had been concealed, and surrounded the building so that escape seemed unlikely. However, the commotion roused the attention of a large number of residents and students who quickly joined the Southerners outside the house. They did not threaten these unwanted interlopers, but engaged the men in conversation as more and more townspeople gathered around them.

With little planning, the Oberlinites began to noticeably enter and leave the house from all doorways, and each took with them a packet of items that the slaveholders could not identify. In fact, they were secreting in bonnets, hoods, shawls,

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<sup>64</sup> *Advocate of Moral Reform and Family Guardian*, May 1, 1853; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, April 21, 1853; Johnson, “Significant Events and Noted Persons,” 54-55.

<sup>65</sup> Johnson, “Significant Events and Noted Persons,” 54-55.

and other items of clothing that were given to the former slaves, who, one by one, exited the house indistinguishable from those who had gone in.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, it was not uncommon for large groups of Oberlin Institute students, books in hand, to occupy slave catchers in “aggravatingly good natured” conversation on various scholarly subjects as these transfers were taking place.<sup>67</sup> The slaveholders, distracted by the students, could not keep count of the large number of men and women entering and leaving the small house, and within a short amount of time, all of the “fugitives” had joined the procession and simply walked to a new location, all right under the noses of their would-be captors.<sup>68</sup>

Eventually, the slaveholders realized what had transpired, and determined anew not to leave without their prizes. They published notice around Lorain County that there was a \$700 reward for the capture of their slaves, and soon found a newcomer to the area willing to act as their spy among the Oberlinites. However, it did not take the attentive townspeople long to become aware of this fact, and Mrs. H.C. Taylor suggested a plan by which Oberlinites would turn the ruse against the unwelcome visitors. Customers to the blacksmith shop where the spy worked conspicuously mentioned that that evening, a covered wagon drawn by four horses would spirit the pilgrims to Cleveland, then on to Canada. If all worked as planned, the spy would betray the “escape plan” to the slaveholders who would then attempt to prevent it.<sup>69</sup>

At the appointed time, seven African American students and residents, including Sabram Cox and Milton Clarke, boarded a wagon, and two white men took the reins. The “slaves” were outfitted in various disguises—some had veils on;

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<sup>66</sup> *Oberliniana*, 24-25.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, 34.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, 24-25

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, 25.

some, like Clarke, wore dresses; others were outfitted in rags. They approached Elyria without incident, and it seemed as if their plan was not working as intended. Nonetheless, they decided to stop at a friendly tavern for a bite to eat before returning to Oberlin. Just as they neared the hitching post, a cry went out, “There they come!,” and a mob of would-be slave catchers encircled the wagon and accosted the white drivers.<sup>70</sup>

“What do you mean by stopping honest travelers in this way?,” the Oberlin men demanded. Just then, the crowd pulled back the curtains of the wagon, revealing a cartload of African Americans assumed to be the slaves in question. “O boys,” Sabram Cox cried out loudly enough for all to hear, “we’re in an awful scrape!” “I guess you are, for once,” one man said, and the crowd pulled the “slaves” out of the wagon and took them to a nearby bar room where they began congratulate themselves on the “big haul” they had just made. The captors drank long into the night while the “slaves” either kept quiet or offered maddeningly ambiguous statements as to their identities.<sup>71</sup>

Sabram Cox had been placed near a roaring fire, and as the night grew long, he became so hot that he was forced to remove the rags that had to that point concealed his identity. As he did, another man in the room exclaimed “By heavens! If there ain’t Cox, of Oberlin!” Cox confirmed their suspicion, and after the white men vouched for them before town officials, the other African American detainees revealed themselves as well.<sup>72</sup> However, this was not before the powerfully-built Cox made

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<sup>70</sup> Milton Clarke’s version of this story may be found in Clarke and Clarke, *Narratives*, 85-88 and Hope, *Heroes in Homespun*, 186-188; See also *Oberliniana*, 25.

<sup>71</sup> *Oberliniana*, 25-26.

<sup>72</sup> At this point, the foresight of the Oberlinites in having two white men accompany the seven decoys was made manifest. Though this was before the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 abrogated the right to jury trial or habeas corpus to the accused, the Black Laws were still in force in Ohio, including the denial of African Americans to testify on their own behalf. Without white witnesses to vouch for them, the decoys could have been enslaved just as easily as the bondsmen whom they represented.

some remarks to the sheriff that he later recalled “were certainly not ambiguous in their nature.” That night, the terrified lawman “folded his tent and silently stole away” from the town. Completely overlooked in the drama was the wagon containing the actual slaves that passed that night quietly through the edge of town en route to Cleveland.<sup>73</sup>

Another group of Oberlinites in the early 1840s employed a similar method to divert slave catchers. When known slave hunters were noticed in town, students “Cooley” and “Whittlesey” decided to gather a group of their fellows, disguise themselves as “fugitive slaves,” and stage an “escape,” while the true fleeing bondsmen moved safely on to their next stop.<sup>74</sup> Whittlesey raced his wagon past the slave catchers towards Lake Erie, and when they gave chase, he let them gain after several miles of pursuit. When the wagon was “overtaken,” its cargo leapt from the back and ran off in different directions into the woods. Cooley could not contain his laughter after a while, and though caught, his “sense of the ridiculous” led him to tear away the black silk that darkened his face and tell the disappointed Southerners “What sublime idiots you are!”<sup>75</sup>

Crude disguises were not always necessary, for Oberlin counted among its residents the talented and widely-known artist, Alonzo Pease. If a man or woman needed to be spirited away from pursuers, Pease was summoned, and within an hour, his paints and skillful brush strokes could transform a “slave” into “a very respectable Caucasian” (with the satisfaction, one Oberlin alumnus remembered in 1883, “of knowing that all the light paints could be washed off”). Thus made up, many men and

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<sup>73</sup> *Oberliniana*, 26-27.

<sup>74</sup> These students were likely Ruell Cooley and either Charles or Henry Whittlesey, who were enrolled together for parts of the years 1841-1846. See *General Catalogue of Oberlin College, 1833-1908* (Oberlin, 1909), 217, 1054-1055.

<sup>75</sup> Charles Grandison Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*, ed. Garth M. Rosell and Richard DuPuis (Grand Rapids, 1989), 412-3; *Oberliniana*, 27-28.

women passed through groups of slave catchers without recognition, sometimes arm in arm with Oberlin professors.<sup>76</sup>

Not long after the rescues recounted above, the news that Milton and Lewis Clarke were actively engaging in Underground work caused a group of Lexington, Kentucky slaveholders to attempt to reclaim one or both “of the impudent Clarks.” A gang of kidnappers, under the leadership of a Mr. Postlewaite, was sent to Ohio. They soon ambushed and detained Milton Clarke on a rural road just outside of Oberlin. Clarke’s first instinct was that he was being accosted by highway robbers, since such boldness by Southerners near the town of Oberlin would have been unexpected. However, when the Kentuckians told him “We want not money, but *you*,” he realized what was transpiring.<sup>77</sup>

Clarke was bound and taken before the sheriff, who had no choice but to admit that there was no doubt as to his identity. What he *could* do for him, however, was argue that Clarke was actually a white man and arrest the captors on charges of assault and battery in Milton’s capture. Once Clarke was ordered released by a writ of *habeas corpus*, the kidnappers “found themselves more surely prisoners than their late captive.” At an antislavery meeting in Oberlin called specially for the occasion, Milton and Lewis Clarke gave impressive speeches. They both soon began to tour the Free States as abolitionist lecturers.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> One escaping slave who was painted to resemble a white woman viewed himself in a mirror, and jokingly exclaimed “Go way, niggah, I neber seed you afore; ‘specs you’se a runaway.” *Oberliniana*, 29.

<sup>77</sup> Hope, *Heroes in Homespun*, 188.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, 188-192; Lewis Clarke, who permanently settled in Oberlin after the Civil War, was the basis of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s character George Harris in her 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. See Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents Upon Which the Story is Founded. Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work* (Boston, 1853), 13-21; *The Washington Post*, September 3, 1880, June 29, 1895, January 11, 1897.

## ***THE MAN-STEALERS***

Despite the fact that no slave catcher was ever successful in returning a man or woman back to slavery from Oberlin, the town's reputation as a safe haven for escaping slaves often led the agents of slaveholders to lurk about the place they called "nigger town" in hope of a significant payday.<sup>79</sup> James Fairchild pointed out that in the person of each fugitive was a marketable value of approximately \$1000 that was "a sufficient motive to rally all available forces for the pursuit." Even more than the farmer who might follow his stray livestock for days, Fairchild noted that "the owner of a fugitive slave would look up the track of his fleeing property for months and even years."<sup>80</sup>

The slave catchers against whom abolitionists sheltered escaping slaves became, for many, the vile face of the South. The dogged determinism of these men to enslave their fellow man did not endear them to abolitionists. Rather, it was their nastiest qualities that, when added on top of their reputations as "man-stealers," repulsed most Oberlinites. Most often, these men were mercenary Southerners who simply craved the monetary rewards slave hunting offered to them. In Southern society, these men ranked below even the slave dealers, yet their appearance in the North, with their bloodhounds, Bowie knives, pistols, and "language and bearing [that] corresponded with these weapons," presented a disgustingly different picture of Southern men than the stereotypical aristocratic gentry of the slaveholding class.<sup>81</sup>

Augustus "Gus" Chambers, a Black man and one of Oberlin's most skilled blacksmiths, was not satisfied with simply calling these Southern emissaries "slave catchers" or "slave hunters." When he received word one day in 1858 that such men

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<sup>79</sup> Edward Henry Fairchild, *Historical Sketch of Oberlin College* (Oberlin, 1868), 9.

<sup>80</sup> Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 91-92.

<sup>81</sup> Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 94-95; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 77.

were lurking about Oberlin and inquiring about *him*, he reckoned the terms insufficient. “I don’t call them *slave-catchers*,” he defiantly proclaimed, “there are mighty few *slaves* around here. I call them *man-stealers*—devilish thieves!”<sup>82</sup>

Abolitionists in cities like New York City, Philadelphia, and Boston might have wondered how Oberlin maintained such a healthy “fugitive” population without the assistance of a vigilance committee, a group of citizens specifically organized to protect townspeople from the iniquities of the Fugitive Slave Law.<sup>83</sup> However, an attempt to reclaim two slaves in 1841 demonstrates why such a group was unnecessary there. A man and his wife, Jefferson and Jane, had been taken into a house about a mile from the center of town. Almost immediately, their pursuers caught up with them. After they forced their way into the Oberlin residence, brandished Bowie knives and pistols, and threatened the lives of the Page family into whose house they had broken, the slavehunters shackled their prey and set out east, away from Oberlin.<sup>84</sup>

Unbeknownst to the slave catchers, another young African American man was living with the Page family. When he realized what was transpiring in the front of the house, he set off as fast as he could run back to the center of town. He reached the college chapel while a huge student antislavery meeting was underway, and as word spread of the outrage at the Page household, the meeting quickly broke up. All the students went *en masse* in pursuit of the Southerners. Though many students had already gone to bed, the cry was put out, “Slave-holders in town!,” the chapel bell “pealed out the alarm,” and the rest of the student body dressed and joined the chase.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> William Cox Cochrane, *The Western Reserve and the Fugitive Slave Law: A Prelude to the Civil War* (Cleveland, 1920), 122-123.

<sup>83</sup> However, at least two Oberlinites were occasionally associated with the New York City vigilance committee when they were in the East. See *The Colored American*, May 15, 22, July 24, 1841; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington rescue*, 57-8.

<sup>84</sup> Samuel D. Cochrane to Gamaliel Bailey, February 27, 1841, in *Philanthropist*, March 24, 1841; *New York Evangelist*, March 27, 1841; *Oberliniana*, 30.

<sup>85</sup> Finney, *Memoirs*, 412-413; *New York Evangelist*, March 27, 1841; *Oberliniana*, 30-31.

The mass of several hundred Oberlinites was reportedly heavily armed. For several miles they pursued the captors, saving time by taking a shortcut through the dark woods. One Democratic paper reported that “the [Oberlin] negroes left their hiding places and running hither and thither, some with guns, and others with clubs came down upon the constable and his party with shoutings, imprecations, and yellings,” while the Oberlin students “threw down their books and being joined with citizens, they hurried after, threatening vengeance to the Rebel Slaveholders, and their adherents.”<sup>86</sup> They caught up with the Southerners at an abandoned house. At the realization that they were being outnumbered nearly ten to one, the men offered no resistance.

Nonetheless, they refused to abandon their “property,” and demanded a hearing in court to assert their claims. An Oberlin farmer named Charles Carrier agreed that a judicial hearing of some sort was indeed necessary, and told the men “We will have justice.” Though Carrier’s statement may have calmed the nerves of the slave catchers, it could only have been because they did not realize what was transpiring in the meantime. While Carrier and a handful of other men stood guard over the Kentuckians until they could go before a judge in nearby Elyria the next morning, other Oberlin men hurried to obtain a warrant for their arrest on charges of breaking and entering and assault and battery.<sup>87</sup>

At sunrise, an even larger group of Oberlin residents than those who gave chase the night before arrived to accompany the guards and Southerners to the county seat of Elyria. Though they knew the kidnappers would also make their own legal claims in court, Oberlinites were confident that a judge would deny them. In case the legal claims to the “fugitives” were upheld, the crowd from Oberlin had hatched a

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<sup>86</sup> *Norwalk Experiment*, March 24, 1841.

<sup>87</sup> Samuel D. Cochrane to Gamaliel Bailey, February 27, 1841, in *Philanthropist*, March 24, 1841; *New York Evangelist*, March 27, 1841.



rescue plan in case of defeat. A wagon and speedy team of horses was situated near the courthouse, and the huge Oberlin contingent was to be spread out across the courtroom and nearby streets to pass the “fugitives” along. The Elyria sheriff (not, of course, the man who had fled in fear of Oberlin’s African Americans two years before) was friendly to the Oberlin community, and he had agreed to give the signal to start the rescue if necessary.<sup>88</sup>

However, the trial was postponed and Jane and Jefferson were jailed. The kidnappers were also arraigned for breaking into the Page’s house without a warrant and assault and battery, and only after posting substantial bonds were they released.<sup>89</sup> As they hurried back to Kentucky to gather more evidence, the Elyria jail, as an Oberlin source remembered, “leaked.”<sup>90</sup> Immediately, Oberlinites were suspected of orchestrating the jailbreak.<sup>91</sup> Though no one from Oberlin ever admitted to it (and many, in fact, flatly denied complicity), the iron grating and bars had been pried from the jail windows. The former slaves were secreted for some time in the house of Oberlin’s Asahel Munger before later being driven on to Cleveland by Professor Horace Taylor.<sup>92</sup> The mystery of the jailbreak may be partially explained, however, by the fact that Asahel Munger was the man in charge of keeping the Oberlin fire squad supplied with ladders, hooks, and axes to be used for rescuing residents from buildings.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *Norwalk Experiment*, March 24, 1841; *New York Evangelist*, March 27, 1841; *Oberliniana*, 31-32.

<sup>89</sup> *The Colored American*, March 27, 1841; Samuel D. Cochrane to Gamaliel Bailey, February 27, 1841, in *Philanthropist*, March 24, 1841. *Norwalk Experiment*, March 24, 1841. The *Norwalk Experiment* reported that the kidnappers’ bonds were posted by local agents of the Democratic Party.

<sup>90</sup> *New York Evangelist*, March 27, 1841; *Oberliniana*, 32.

<sup>91</sup> *Cleveland Advertiser*, n.d., in *Liberator*, April 23, 1841.

<sup>92</sup> *N.Y. Journal of Commerce*, n.d., in *Liberator*, April 23, 1841; *Oberliniana*, 32.

<sup>93</sup> *The Oberlin News-Tribune*, March 29, 1935; *New York Evangelist*, May 22, 1841.

### ***“YOU-TOUCH-ME-IF-YOU-DARE”***

The local Democratic description of the Elyria rescue makes it clear that African Americans played important and conspicuous parts in the maintenance of Oberlin’s Underground line. In fact, more than any other aspect of Oberlin society, the operations of its Underground Railroad station were disproportionately controlled and led by its African American residents. For those who themselves were self-emancipated, the Underground was a key survival tactic. For all Northern African Americans, their participation was a powerful political statement against the Slave Power. African American Oberlinites publicly encouraged Southern slaves to attempt to escape their bondage, and offered their own town as a refuge, even in the face of the fugitive laws. One 1849 meeting, led by such Oberlin African American notables William Howard Day, Sabram Cox, and John Watson resolved that “no person claimed as a slave shall be taken from our midst without trouble.”<sup>94</sup>

Once a passenger of the Railroad arrived in town, the unofficial welcoming committee was often a group of fellow travelers, those residents in Oberlin who had made parts of the same terrifying journey themselves, “guided by Freedom’s star.”<sup>95</sup> For many of Oberlin’s Southern-born African American population, the town was their final destination on the Underground, and their homes became reception centers where brave self-emancipators could rest, recover their energies, and gain motivation and encouragement from those who had experienced similar travails firsthand. Oberlin’s various conductors knew to bring travelers to “the arms of their kindred...who had shared bondage with the wayfarers,” where they would be compassionately welcomed. Only after long “expressive silence” would the still be

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<sup>94</sup> *Liberator*, March 2, 1849.

<sup>95</sup> See speech of Amasa Walker in *Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention, Called by the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, and Held in London, From Tuesday, June 13, to Tuesday, June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1843* (London, 1843), 206-207.

broken by “the tearful hosanna, ‘the Lord be praised, honey.’” In one case, an Oberlin man who had once been imprisoned nearly three months for attempting to frustrate the Fugitive Slave Law transported a wagonload of former slaves to one such African American residence. He wrote that the heartwarming scene he witnessed more than “compensated [him] for eighty-five days of imprisonment on the fugitive’s behalf.”<sup>96</sup>

Sometimes it was impossible to safely hide people in Oberlin homes or buildings, especially when the slave-catchers were in town and inquiring. In such cases, conductors in Oberlin turned their town’s isolation to the advantage of the slaves. For many years, there was a dense, wooded area several miles wide between Oberlin and Elyria. Gus Chambers lived at the edge of this spot two miles northeast of town, and he oversaw the care and protection of men and women who were forced to temporarily hide there while their trail grew cold to their pursuers. Chambers, himself a former slave, served as an intermediary between Oberlin residents offering the travelers aid, and the slaves within the forest who sought news of loved ones or information on the status of the slave-catchers in town.<sup>97</sup>

Oberlin’s involvement in the Underground Railroad was legendary even in its time, and one consequence was that unscrupulous men and women sometimes attempted to take advantage of the town’s generosity. In 1860, a group of African Americans arrived in Oberlin seeking aid “upon the pretense of their being fugitives, when in fact they were imposters.” This case and others like it “were very annoying to some of [Oberlin’s] colored men,” and invariably, they would chase the transgressors out of town and often give them a physical reminder that flight from slavery was not to be considered a mockery in Oberlin. Imposters would be chased “with the sole

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<sup>96</sup> *Lorain County News*, April 11, 1860; See also John Mercer Langston, “The World’s Anti-Slavery Movement: Its heroes and Its Triumphs,” in John Mercer Langston, *Freedom and Citizenship: Selected Lectures and Addresses* (Washington, 1883), 64.

<sup>97</sup> Cochrane, *The Western Reserve and the Fugitive Slave Law*, 123.

object of frightening him so as to prevent the recurrence of such imposition.”<sup>98</sup> In at least one case an African American posse overtook the culprit, and in the polite words of an Oberlin reporter, “inflicted a dozen light taps on his back, whereupon he left for the West.”<sup>99</sup>

Federal officials attempting to execute provisions of the Fugitive Slave Law met even more hostile resistance at the hands of Oberlin African Americans. Anson P. Dayton had served as Oberlin’s township clerk until defeated at the polls in 1857 by John Langston. Stung by his defeat, Dayton abandoned the Republican Party, became an outspoken Democrat, and was soon appointed by the Buchanan administration Deputy U.S. Marshal for Ohio’s Northern District to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. It was not long before Dayton began to act on his duties, but he found no success. The head of one African American family he pestered ran him off with a shotgun, firing over his head to both frighten him and notify the town of the deed. When Dayton alerted a North Carolina slaveholder to the location of his former slave in Oberlin, stone cutter James Smith, Smith confronted him in downtown Oberlin and beat him with a stout hickory stick before Dayton could escape into a nearby building.<sup>100</sup> A citizens’ committee eventually ordered Dayton to immediately leave the Oberlin limits, and when his retreat was not as speedy as some may have wished, five “active” African American men followed his tracks in the snow until they caught up with him, forced him to confess to his role in past attempts on “fugitives” in Oberlin as well as to give up his accomplices, and extracted a promise on Dayton’s part to resign his post.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Imposters posed a real danger to Northern African Americans. Some imposters were actually spies from the South sent to discover the routes of the Underground Railroad, rather than simply charlatans hoping to benefit from abolitionist generosity. See Coffin, *Reminiscences*, 343-344.

<sup>99</sup> *Lorain County News*, April 4, 1860.

<sup>100</sup> Cochrane, *The Western Reserve and the Fugitive Slave Law*, 121

<sup>101</sup> *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, February 25, 1860.

Even though federal marshals and Southern slave-catchers sometimes seemed a ubiquitous presence in Oberlin, it was nearly impossible to reclaim a free Oberlinite or “fugitive slave” from the town’s protective grasp. The only instance of an alleged runaway being claimed and even temporarily jailed was the short incarceration before the Elyria jailbreak in 1841. The vigilance of Oberlin’s white residents was a powerful preventative, but the instinct for self-preservation among their African American neighbors was perhaps an even greater defense. Brooklyn abolitionist William J. Watkins could tell that Oberlin African Americans were “not afraid of the white man.” He noted “a sort of you-touch-me-if-you-dare” about them, and would not have been surprised by the security plans of a man like Augustus Chambers.<sup>102</sup> William Cochrane remembered as a boy hearing Chambers declare “if any one of those men darkens my door, he is a dead man.” In his blacksmith shop, Chambers always had a hammer and iron bar at the ready for protection, and most often also had a red-hot poker in the fire. Above his door was a loaded double barrel shotgun, and beside his bed were razor sharp knives and a pistol. He would never kill a man, he declared, but he clarified that a “*man-stealer*” was not fully human. “The man who tries to take my life,” Chambers declared, “loses his *own*.”<sup>103</sup>

The man of whom Chambers spoke on that occasion remained in Oberlin long enough in the summer of 1858 to raise considerable alarm, especially among the African American population. The Southerner lurked around the (alcohol-serving!) hotel owned by Chauncey Wack, one of Oberlin’s few outspoken Democrats. When Deputy Anson Dayton was seen entering the establishment to meet with the stranger, it was clear to many that the man must be a slavehunter.<sup>104</sup> Whether legally free or

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<sup>102</sup> Watkins quoted in Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 339.

<sup>103</sup> Cochrane, *The Western Reserve and the Fugitive Slave Law*, 123.

<sup>104</sup> *The Cleveland Daily Herald*, April 8, 1859; Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 183; See also *Liberator*, April 29, 1859; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 2, 38.

not, Oberlin African Americans acknowledged their vulnerability under the Fugitive Slave Law of being “drag[ged] back—or for the first time—into helpless and lifelong bondage.”<sup>105</sup> They began to take special care in their nighttime travels, sometimes kept their children home from school, and whenever possible avoided venturing into areas outside of Oberlin’s “citadel of human freedom.” Their conversation increasingly betrayed their anxiety, and their prayers implored “the Mighty Jehovah” to save them “against all treachery and infidelity.” John Ramsey, Oberlin’s oldest African American, publicly prayed “that there might be found among them *no Judas*, faithless and false.”<sup>106</sup>

Two weeks after Augustus Chambers vowed to protect himself against the Kentucky slave hunters, he and the rest of the town found out that the men were not actually in Oberlin to make an attempt on his freedom. Though they were in Oberlin to reclaim an alleged fugitive, they would not make their effort in so brash a manner as to trigger a response like Chambers’ threat. Neither would they attempt to do so, as another man noted, “in bold appropriate execution of the law.”<sup>107</sup> When the attempt was made which would soon demand the attention of the nation, it was through the deceit of a young white boy who was willing to trade the freedom of his townsman for twenty dollars.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> *Liberator*, June 3, 1859.

<sup>106</sup> Langston, *from the Virginia Plantation*, 183; See also *Liberator*, April 29, June 3, 1859. Ramsey did not know his exact birth date, but some Oberlinites estimated the year of his birth to have been as early as 1770. Ramsey himself believed that he was well past forty when he first arrived in Oberlin around 1840. See *The Oberlin News*, December 8, 1899, January 25, 1901, January 26, 1910; *The Oberlin Tribune*, January 28, 1910; *Oberlin News*, May 7, 1901; Bigglestone, *They Stopped in Oberlin*, 171-174.

<sup>107</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 184.

<sup>108</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 19, 35, 99-101.

## ***THE OBERLIN-WELLINGTON RESCUE***

The slavehunter, Kentuckian Anderson Jennings, had been sent to Ohio in search of a slave reportedly belonging to his uncle. In Oberlin, Jennings found no trace of the slave Henry, but he did clearly recognize an escaped slave belonging to his neighbor.<sup>109</sup> John Price had escaped John Bacon's plantation in Kentucky in March of 1858, eventually settling in Oberlin, and Jennings immediately fired off a letter seeking the power of attorney necessary to claim him.<sup>110</sup>

Jennings quickly ascertained who, besides Chauncey Wack, were the town's open Democrats "whom a fellow could put confidence in." With the help of a handful of proslavery Ohioans with whom he had made acquaintance elsewhere, he went out to consult with one or two sympathetic locals to work out a plan for the capture of Price and another slave named Frank whom they thought might also be in Oberlin.<sup>111</sup> They met with Lewis Boynton, a Democratic farmer who lived just outside town, but Jennings was most struck by the precocity of his son, Shakespeare. At one point, Jennings followed the boy outside and offered him a cash reward to entice John Price, whom he apparently knew, into a cart and transport him out of Oberlin where the capture could be made more safely away from abolitionist eyes.<sup>112</sup>

The next day, Shakespeare found John Price, and lured him into his buggy on the pretext of helping him find laborers to harvest his family's potato crop.<sup>113</sup> When they were just outside the Oberlin town limits, Jennings' agents overtook their cart as planned. Price was quickly transferred into their wagon. Boynton returned to Oberlin to inform Jennings of the capture, while the wagon that held Price headed South

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<sup>109</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 19.

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, 2, 19; Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 112. Shipherd's book is a useful compilation of most of the trial transcripts and many newspaper excerpts from the legal action that followed.

<sup>111</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 2.

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*, 2, 35, 100-1.

<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*, 19.

towards the town of Wellington. There the kidnappers hoped to board the 5:13 train to Columbus and process their claim in the friendlier southern city.<sup>114</sup>

However, on the way to Wellington, the slave catchers' wagon passed two Oberlin students. Recognizing them, Price cried out for help.<sup>115</sup> One of these young men was Ansel Lyman, a staunch abolitionist who had served as one of John Brown's lieutenants in the Kansas warfare of the mid 1850s.<sup>116</sup> He hurried back to Oberlin to alert the people, and as soon as word began circulating, all other business in town screeched to a halt.<sup>117</sup> Lyman instinctively went to African American John Watson's grocery store, and soon "The crowd was *all* rushing [there] as the rallying point."<sup>118</sup>

Watson himself did not stay at his store very long after hearing Lyman's news. As soon as he could, he jumped into a buggy with several other Black men and they became the first to begin a mass race towards Wellington.<sup>119</sup> There was a rush on the livery stables in town as hundreds of residents looked for speedy mounts with which to pursue the kidnappers, and "every hack in town" was soon full of energized Oberlinites en route to Wellington.<sup>120</sup> Richard Winsor, Price's Sunday School teacher, was lucky to flag down a passing wagon with room enough for he and his three rifles, and as he shouted "I am going to rescue John Price!," "shout on shout and

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<sup>114</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 29, 1858; James Harris Fairchild, "Wellington Rescue," n.d., 25, manuscript fragment, RG 2/3, James Harris Fairchild papers, Series 8, Box 9, OCA.; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 2.

<sup>115</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 29, 1858; *New York Daily Tribune*, September 18, 1858, in *Liberator*, October 1, 1858; *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, April 14, 1859; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 3.

<sup>116</sup> *Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance and Rebellion*, Vol.I, ed. Junius P. Rodriguez (Westport, CT, 2007), 359; Nat Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War* (Syracuse, 1990), 67; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 23.

<sup>117</sup> *New York Daily Tribune*, September 18, 1858, in *Liberator*, October 1, 1858; *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, April 14, 1859.

<sup>118</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 36.

<sup>119</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 29, 1858; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 22, 108-109.

<sup>120</sup> *New York Daily Tribune*, September 18, 1858, in *Liberator*, October 1, 1858; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 33, 58.



cheer on cheer went up from the assembly.”<sup>121</sup> Older residents not up for the chase offered their steeds for freedom’s service, like one Mrs. Ryder, who charged the man who borrowed her horse “If necessary, spare not the life of my beast, but rescue the boy.”<sup>122</sup> When there were no more horses or buggies left available in town, eager Oberlinites faced north and began the trek on foot.<sup>123</sup>

In all the ruckus, Chauncey Wack noticed six African American men, some he believed may have been fugitive slaves themselves, loading guns and preparing shot cartridges.<sup>124</sup> In addition to this unnamed group, prominent Oberlin African Americans including John A. Copeland, Lewis Sheridan Leary, O.S.B. Wall, Charles Langston, and self emancipated men Thomas Gena, John Hartwell, and Jerry Fox armed themselves and sought out transportation to Wellington.<sup>125</sup> Leary remembered that many of the Oberlin community’s most prominent citizens and faculty members were in a prayer meeting at First Church, and thus may have been oblivious to the news. He sprinted across Tappan Square and burst through the church door “all excited.” Abruptly, the people in the meeting ended their prayers and sought out swift horses.<sup>126</sup>

John Watson’s wagon reached Wellington in less than forty five minutes. Soon the main square of the town was filled with Oberlinites and curious onlookers. The area was so packed that late-arriving wagons and horses had to be hitched some

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<sup>121</sup> Richard Winsor, “How John Price was Rescued,” in *The Oberlin Jubilee, 1833-1883*, ed. W.G. Ballantine (Oberlin, 1883), 251, 254. Winsor had been in Boston in 1854 and witnessed the rendition of his current Oberlin classmate Anthony Burns to slavery.

<sup>122</sup> Winsor, “How John Price was Rescued,” 252.

<sup>123</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 31; A. B. Nettleton to Albert Temple Swing, n.d., in Swing, *James Harris Fairchild, or, Sixty Eight Years with a Christian College* (New York, 1907), 377.

<sup>124</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 9, 1859.

<sup>125</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 4, 13, 22-23, 104; Winsor, “How John Price was Rescued,” 251-255.

<sup>126</sup> *Oberlin News*, October 13, 1909.

ways off from the town center.<sup>127</sup> By 3:00 in the afternoon, several hundred men had surrounded Wadsworth's Tavern, the Wellington hotel where Jennings and his men had holed up with their captive John Price in an attic room.<sup>128</sup> Though the slave catchers would not be catching the 5:13 train to Columbus, it was rumored that they had wired Cleveland begging for military assistance.<sup>129</sup> As they waited, the crowd shouted "'Bring him out!' 'Bring out the man!' 'Out with him!' 'Out!' 'Out!'"<sup>130</sup>

As the situation seemed more and more desperate, the Deputy U.S. Marshall from Columbus (who was also with the slave catchers) made a futile attempt to demand compliance and assistance under the Fugitive Slave Law to all within hearing.<sup>131</sup> As the crowd pressed in upon the hotel, owner Oliver Wadsworth, a staunch Democrat and "faithful Buchaneer," closed off the building and posted guards at the doors and stairways.<sup>132</sup> Wellington constable Barnabus Meacham frantically tried to negotiate with leaders of both groups for a peaceful resolution, and incredibly, he allowed several Oberlin students into the hotel and up to the room where Price was being held.<sup>133</sup> As many as twenty men were allowed into the attic (including the students, whose presence was apparently forgotten by the slave catchers). When Charles Langston returned from a visit to the loft, he supposedly declared to the captors that legal measures for Price's release would not likely be successful, and, forebodingly, declared to them that "we will have him any way." He urged the slave

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<sup>127</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 29, 1858; Fairchild, "Wellington Rescue," 26; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 22, 27, 118; *New York Daily Tribune*, September 18, 1858, in *Liberator*, October 1, 1858.

<sup>128</sup> Estimates in the court testimony put the number as high as 1000. See Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 30, 59.

<sup>129</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 38-39.

<sup>130</sup> Fairchild, "Wellington Rescue," 26; Winsor, "How John Price was rescued," 252; *New York Daily Tribune*, September 18, 1858, in *Liberator*, October 1, 1858.

<sup>131</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 26-27.

<sup>132</sup> *New York Daily Tribune*, September 18, 1858, in *Liberator*, October 1, 1858; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 104.

<sup>133</sup> *New York Daily Tribune*, September 18, 1858, in *Liberator*, October 1, 1858; Shipperd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 37; Winsor, "How John Price was Rescued," 252.

catchers to “give the boy up” and avoid a potential brawl.<sup>134</sup> The pistol-shaped bulge in his coat pocket gave his words even more authority.<sup>135</sup>

Though the 5:13 train did not bring military aid, the crowd grew nervous that a later arrival would. Spontaneously, two separate groups of Oberlin abolitionists began assaults upon the hotel. The first, a racially mixed group led by Oberlin students John Cowles, William Lincoln, and Ansel Lyman, fought for several minutes past the guards and up the stairs, but could not break down the door to the attic. While they pondered their next steps, a group of African Americans led by Oberlinites John Scott, John Copeland, and Charles Langston, broke through the hotel’s back door and joined the others outside Price’s room.<sup>136</sup>

There was, however, a hole near the door where a stove pipe had formerly run. Hearing familiar voices through the hole, one of the forgotten Oberlin students, Richard Winsor, quietly slipped a note through to Lincoln on the outside, suggesting a way to open the door.<sup>137</sup> Lincoln shouted to the slave catchers inside that he would reach through and shoot them if they did not open up, and as Jennings went closer to the hole to investigate, the student struck him on the head with his pistol that loosened Jennings’ grip on the door. This allowed the rescuers to force their way in.<sup>138</sup> Within seconds, Windsor was pushing Price out the door and into the arms of others who passed him over their shoulders and out into the open square.<sup>139</sup> The hotel’s owner could hardly tell whether he touched the ground.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Langston, *Freedom and Citizenship*, 18; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 38, 105, 119.

<sup>135</sup> *ibid.*, 105, 119.

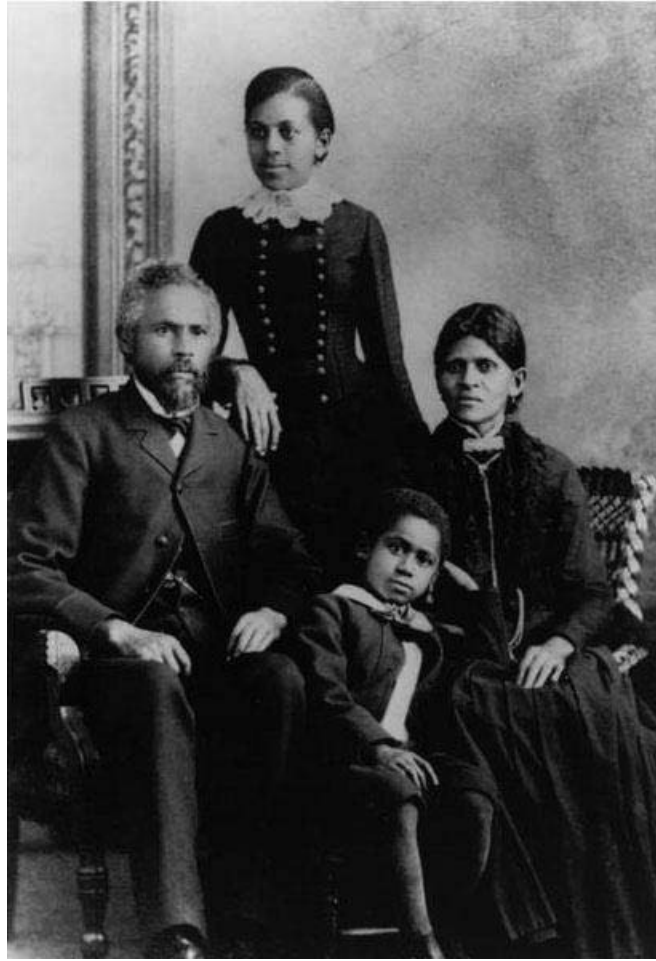
<sup>136</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 29, 1858; *New York Daily Tribune*, September 18, 1858, in *Liberator*, October 1, 1858; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 27, 101-3.

<sup>137</sup> Winsor, “How John Price was rescued,” 253.

<sup>138</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 18; *Oberlin News*, October 13, 1909.

<sup>139</sup> *New York Daily Tribune*, September 18, 1858, in *Liberator*, October 1, 1858; Fairchild, “Wellington Rescue,” 26; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 18-19; Windsor, “How John Price was Rescued,” 253-254.

<sup>140</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 30.



**Illustration 9.3: John Scott and family  
(Oberlin College Archives)**

At sunset, several hours after the first Oberlinites arrived in Wellington, a lone straggler who had started out on foot, Edward Kinney, arrived just in time to see Simeon Bushnell, Windsor, and John Price racing towards him in a buggy headed back to Oberlin.<sup>141</sup> The horse was “on the jump,” and Windsor greeted Kinney as they passed by, waving his gun in the air and shouting “all right!” and “All is well.” As fast as they had come, most of the crowd filed in behind Price’s speeding buggy and triumphantly returned home.<sup>142</sup> They had, in John Langston’s words, rescued

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<sup>141</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 31-32.

<sup>142</sup> *New York Daily Tribune*, September 18, 1858, in *Liberator*, October 1, 1858; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 30-32, 120-121.

John Price “in the general purpose and resolution as if it were of a single fearless giant.”<sup>143</sup>

Anderson Jennings, like every other slave catcher who ever attempted to reclaim a “fugitive” from Oberlin, was left with nothing but frustration and fear. One of his colleagues asked from the window if it would be safe for the men to leave now that Price was free. “Yes,” one person replied, “They will be safe now, if they are never to come again; but if they come again, no one will be accountable for their lives a moment!” As the remaining crowd shouted “Aye! Aye! Aye!” in approval, Jennings shouted down that he had only come to execute the dictates of the United States Constitution, but the abolitionists had “been too much for him.” One impassioned man leapt upon a box and promised Jennings that he would indeed “find us too much for ‘em every time!” For men and women in Oberlin whom Southerners mistakenly called “fugitives,” it truly seemed that “all the South combined cannot carry him back, if we say No!”<sup>144</sup> Unbeknownst to the Oberlin abolitionists, the sound of that “No” would reach the nation’s capital, and then echo across the nation until it erupted into civil war.

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<sup>143</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 185.

<sup>144</sup> *New York Daily Tribune*, September 18, 1858, in *Liberator*, October 1, 1858.

## CHAPTER TEN

### *“This drama of genuine manhood and courage”: Oberlin and the Fight for Freedom*

“The opportunity of years, now crowded into an hour, visits upon you and beckons, entreats, commands you to come, come *now*, come *instantly*, come with a shout, and receive the baptism which is to admit you into the glorious company of the people of every clime and every hue, who by their own blood have vindicated their *right* to all the blessings and all the powers of liberty—and to whose own right arms the Lord of Hosts has given the victory.”<sup>1</sup>

As the sun was setting over Oberlin on September 13, 1858, one of its most prominent African American men was returning from a legal engagement in an adjoining county. To his surprise, John Mercer Langston found “neither life nor stir in or about the village.” The whole town seemed to have left *en masse*.<sup>2</sup> He soon received a quick account of the events of that day from one of the few residents left in town, and headed with all haste towards Wellington, hoping “that he might arrive in time to play some humble part in this drama of genuine manhood and courage.” Midway into his dash south, however, Langston was passed in the opposite direction by Simeon Bushnell’s buggy spiriting John Price back towards Oberlin. Soon, he was also overtaken by a host of Oberlinites, led by his brother Charles and brother-in-law O.S.B. Wall, returning triumphantly to town.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrews to John Mercer Langston, July 4, 1863, in *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, May 28, 1864.

<sup>2</sup> John Mercer Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capital, or, the First and Only Negro Representative in Congress from the Old Dominion* (Hartford, 1894), 184.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 185.

Without possibly knowing all the facts of the case, the young lawyer easily realized the gravity of the situation. Hundreds of his fellow townsmen had been involved in an open and successful defiance of federal authority and the Fugitive Slave Law. Moreover, his own kinsmen and other African Americans had played major roles in striking this solid blow for freedom. The triumphant reception of the Rescuers as they gathered again in Oberlin was greater than any celebration “as had ever assembled within the limits of that consecrated town,” yet Langston knew that the government’s response would be both forceful and swift in coming.<sup>4</sup>

How the Oberlin community would handle the aftermath would have enormous consequences. Over the next few months, the town’s diverse and biracial abolitionist band carefully manipulated the Rescue episode into an extraordinary propaganda triumph. In Ohio and across the North, the flagging Republican Party embraced the Oberlin Rescuers, and in the process, the resulting injection of radicalism helped rescue the party from its drift towards conservatism and directed it down the path that would ultimately lead to a national policy of emancipation.

At every step along that course, Oberlin abolitionists remained the faithful conscience of the antislavery movement. When racism beckoned, they helped push it away. When compromise reared its ugly face, they shunned it. When martyrs were required, they provided them. And when the final war for freedom demanded their lives, they rushed forward into battle in droves.

### ***THE FUGITIVE SLAVE LAW “CAN’T BE DID”***

As soon as Sim Bushnell and Richard Winsor were safely back in Oberlin, they sought out the few abolitionists in town who had not made the trip to Wellington. With Professor James Monroe and bookseller James Fitch, they hustled Price to the

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<sup>4</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 185.

home of Professor James Fairchild. Though Fairchild did not personally know him, he agreed to hide Price in his attic for three days and nights until arrangements could be made for John to leave Oberlin for Canada.<sup>5</sup>

When a sufficient portion of the rescue crowd had made it back into Oberlin, they began to tell those who had stayed behind about the incredible events of that afternoon. As night fell, an impromptu antislavery meeting was convened where speeches were delivered that attacked the Fugitive Slave Law, slaveholders, and all that would offer them sympathy.<sup>6</sup> Jacob H. Shipherd closed the festivities by calling for three groans for U.S. Marshal Dayton and three cheers for the rescue of John Price.<sup>7</sup>

As they had in the Rescue itself, Oberlin's African American residents figured heavily in the rally as well as in related activities that followed. These Oberlinites were some of the most politically savvy people in Ohio, and before the dust had settled, John and Charles Langston others had joined with other Black Ohio activists in issuing a call for a state convention of the "'colored citizens' of Ohio." Noting that "Two thirds of every Congress is taken up discussing the question, 'What shall we do with the nigger,'" Black leaders thought it only proper to take their usually active role in debating "the questions in which they were so deeply interested."<sup>8</sup>

When the convention met in November, Charles Langston, who had quickly become an abolitionist celebrity for his role in the rescue, was chosen as its president. His remarks were said to have been "very severe on the Democracy, and very gentle

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<sup>5</sup> James H. Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad: An Address Delivered for the [Western Reserve Historical] Society in Association Hall, Cleveland, January 24, 1895* (Cleveland, 1895), 114; James Harris Fairchild, "Wellington Rescue," n.d., 27, manuscript fragment, RG 2/3, James Harris Fairchild papers, Series 8, Box 9, Oberlin College Archives (hereafter OCA); See also "My Childhood Memories of James Fairchild and Mary Kellogg," MSS, 1926, RG 30/35, Frances Hosford papers, OCA.

<sup>6</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 196.

<sup>7</sup> Jacob R. Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue* (Oberlin, 1859), 107. Dayton had already fled the town, "his coat-tail flying behind."

<sup>8</sup> *Liberator*, October 15, 1858.



towards the Republicans,” as were those of his brother John.<sup>9</sup> The Langstons, with Peter Clark, William Howard Day, and a huge crowd of white and African American abolitionists in the afternoon session, committed the convention to the formation of a new permanent statewide African American organization, and in doing so resurrected the old Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society. The new society pledged itself “to secure, by political and moral means, so far as may be, the immediate and unconditional abolition of American slavery, and the repeal of all the laws and parts of laws, State and national, that make distinction on account of color.”<sup>10</sup> All means to the ends were left on the table, including the resort to brute force if necessary.

As John Langston’s biographers argue, the Oberlin and Ohio African American leadership had unmistakably “thrown down the gauntlet” before the Slave Power, and Oberlin’s white residents were not far behind. In the immediate wake of the rescue, Oberlinites fired off letters to newspapers across the country asserting, as one did, that “The Fugitive Slave Law ‘can’t be did’ in this part of the Reserve at least.”<sup>11</sup> Oberlin was clearly holding its collective head high, and at least one Western Reserve newspaper blamed the “belligerent demonstrations” of the Rescuers and their supporters for the general upheaval that followed.<sup>12</sup> This was only partially true, however. It was the reputation of Oberlin as a “hot-bed of abolitionism,” now affirmed by the Rescue, that set the stage for a legal episode that captivated the nation and inched America closer to the brink of war.

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<sup>9</sup> *Liberator*, December 3, 1858

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*; *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, December 4, 1858.

<sup>11</sup> *Cleveland Leader*, September 21, 1858; See also William and Aimee Cheek, *John Mercer Langston and the Fight for Black Freedom* (Urbana, 1989), 328; William C. Cochran, *The Western Reserve and the Fugitive Slave Law* (Cleveland, 1920), 132-133.

<sup>12</sup> *Lorain County Eagle*, April 20, 1859.

Before the agitation emanating from Oberlin reached an unbearable level to critics, even the Cleveland papers made almost no mention of the Rescue.<sup>13</sup> However, within days of the Cincinnati black convention, the federal grand jury of the Northern District of Ohio handed down indictments against thirty seven Lorain County men, both white and African American, charging them with aiding and abetting the rescue of John Price in defiance of the Fugitive Slave Law.<sup>14</sup> The grand jury was made up entirely of known Democrats, including Lewis Boynton, the father of the boy who had betrayed Price. As one black Oberlinite caustically remarked, “The son betrays, and the father indicts!” Even when Judas Iscariot betrayed Christ, he went on, in his deep consciousness of guilt and shame, he had the decency to hang himself. These men had betrayed a helpless slave, but they demonstrated no comparable sense of guilt or shame that drove them to a “deed of self-destruction, in the perpetuation of which they might have properly imitated their great prototype in treachery!”<sup>15</sup>

Even though John Langston was not in Oberlin or Wellington the day of the rescue, prosecutors nonetheless took great pains, though unsuccessful, to win an indictment against the West’s most outspoken abolitionist.<sup>16</sup> When the U.S. Marshal finally appeared in Oberlin on December 7, he carried among the dozens of notices of indictment three for more of the town’s most rabid abolitionists, James Fitch, Ralph Plumb, and Professor Henry Peck, who, like Langston, were not even near Wellington the day of the rescue. Still, nearly all of the indicted Oberlinites, including the three men who never left town that day, willingly met the U.S. Marshal and gave their word that they would appear in Cleveland the following afternoon. Twelve African

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<sup>13</sup> See Cochran, *The Western Reserve*, 132-133 for the scant coverage given the rescue by the Cleveland papers.

<sup>14</sup> *The Cleveland Daily Herald*, December 7, 1858; Fairchild, “Wellington Rescue,” 26; Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 186.

<sup>15</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 186.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*; Fairchild, “Wellington Rescue,” 26-27; Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 113.

Americans were indicted, including Charles Langston, O.S.B. Wall, John Watson, John Scott, and John Copeland. The federal official felt “as safe with their promise as their bond” regarding all the men he served with indictments.<sup>17</sup> Oberlin abolitionists were not anarchists, and their concerted actions and statements in years past had made sure that few outsiders actually thought so. However, following the example of Christ, they were fully prepared to face the legal consequences for violating laws that they felt were immoral.

When the indicted Rescuers returned to Oberlin from Cleveland, temporarily free on their own recognizance, they shared what was billed as a “Felon’s Feast” with their Wellington co-defendants. Hosted by the Oberlin Rescuers and their wives at the college’s Palmer House, it was, as one observer wrote, “a good social dinner, followed by a real ‘feast of reason and flow of soul.’” Toasts (cold water) went up from all around. John Langston praised “The seed of to-day which brings the harvest of to-morrow” and predicted the approaching reinstatement of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the first having been struck down by slavery and the second by the Fugitive Slave Law. Rescuer Ralph Plumb took time to toast “*The Alien and Sedition Law of 1798 and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850*—Alike arbitrary, undemocratic, and unconstitutional.” “As did the one,” he hoped, “so may the other rouse the country to a political and moral revolution.”<sup>18</sup>

### **“NOT GUILTY, IN BEHALF OF ALL”**

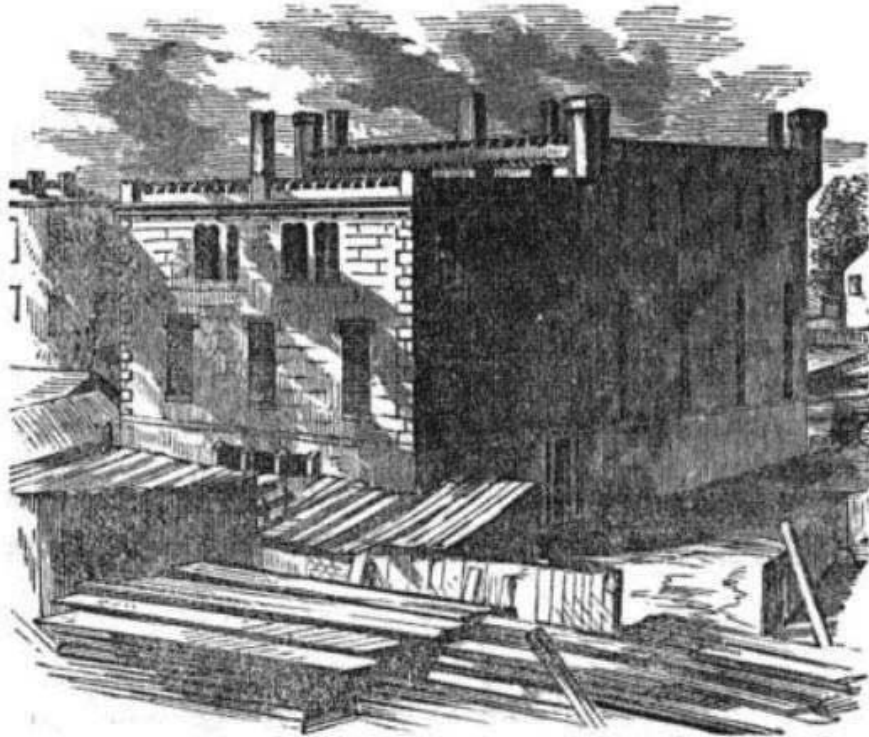
The trials of the Rescuers were set to begin in April, and the battle lines were clearly drawn between the Higher and Lower law, none too evenly, as it turned out. Without exception, every person connected with the court and prosecution, “from the

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<sup>17</sup> Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 113; *The Cleveland Daily Herald*, December 9, 1858.

<sup>18</sup> *Cleveland Morning Leader*, n.d., in Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 5; *Oberlin Evangelist*, January 19, 1859; *Liberator*, January 28, 1859.

judge on the bench down to the claimants of the fugitive,” was an outspoken Democrat, and as James Fairchild remembered, within the courtroom, “the Fugitive Slave Law held full sway.”<sup>19</sup> Judge George Belden made the opening remarks for the prosecution, arguing that “This Oberlin ‘higher law’—which I call ‘Devil’s law’—as interpreted by the Oberlin saints, is just what makes every man’s conscience his



**Illustration 10.1: The Cleveland Jail**  
(from Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin Wellington Rescue* (1859))

criterion as to right or wrong. The true ‘higher law’ is the law of the country in which we exist, and there would be no safety for the whole world or community, a perfect hell upon earth would prevail, if this Law was carried out. It gives all to the black

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<sup>19</sup> Joshua R. Giddings to Ralph Plumb, May 4, 1859, in *Liberator*, May 9, 27, 1859; *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, April 18, 1859; *Oberlin Evangelist*, March 16, 1859; Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 114.

man, but the devil take the white man!”<sup>20</sup> John Langston angrily declared that every aspect of the trial was organized and constituted “*to convict*.”<sup>21</sup>

The first two of the thirty seven to be tried were found guilty, to the surprise of no one. Sim Bushnell, the driver of the getaway buggy, was the first to stand before the court and was quickly convicted. Charles Langston was next to be tried. Though his case was not as clear-cut as Bushnell’s (who was white), prosecutors hoped to make a clear point in Langston’s trial by demonstrating the dangers of “nigger social equality” as practiced in Oberlin. They also wanted to deal a weighty blow to those whose trials remained, causing them to “cease fighting” and “plead guilty.”<sup>22</sup> Despite the defense’s plea to jurors to lay aside all political biases or prejudices, forget Langston’s color, and to try his case as though he were one of their equals, “as he is, a man,” he was convicted after only a half hour of deliberation.<sup>23</sup>

After the two convictions, Bushnell was sentenced to sixty days’ imprisonment, court costs, and a \$600 fine, and Langston was thus able to anticipate his own fate.<sup>24</sup> When the judge asked him if he had anything to say on why the law should not also be pronounced upon him, Langston arose and gave one of the most effective antislavery speeches of the antebellum period. He called the Fugitive Slave law “an unjust one, one made to crush the colored man,” yet he cared little for debate over its constitutionality or his innocence on such grounds. He had not been taken as a *slave* under that law, but indicted as a *citizen* for violating it, and he decried the denial to him of a trial before “an *impartial* jury” of his peers. As he saw it, the men gathered to hear his case in Cleveland were neither impartial nor his peers. They were

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<sup>20</sup> *Liberator*, April 29, 1859; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 82-83.

<sup>21</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 186-187.

<sup>22</sup> *New York Times*, April 20, 23, 27, 1859; *The National Era*, April 21, 1859; Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 330.

<sup>23</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 94-107, 114-169; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, June 18, 1859.

<sup>24</sup> *New York Times*, April 20, 23, 29, 1859; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 170.

actually perfect examples of men infected by “universal and deeply fixed *prejudices*” that grew out of the belief that African Americans had willingly consented for two hundred years to be enslaved—to be “scourged, crushed, and cruelly oppressed.” This belief offended most Americans, who honored those who rebelled at oppression and despised those who meekly submitted to it. So long as African Americans were believed to submit as a people, Langston argued, they would “as a people be despised.” His jury, he went on, “came into the box with that feeling...The gentleman who prosecuted me, the court itself, and even the counsel who defended me had that feeling.”<sup>25</sup>

Langston believed that the time for such beliefs had passed. His speech was both a demand that African American militancy be acknowledged as well as a call to others of his race to strive towards his standard. He and every other African American who had gone from Oberlin to Wellington that day had done so aware that they possessed no rights “which white men are bound to respect.” There was no place in America, not even the nation’s capitol, where he could tell a U.S. States Marshal “that my father was a Revolutionary soldier, that he served under Lafayette, and fought through the whole war, and that he fought for *my* freedom as much as for his own” without risking being “clutch[ed]...with his bloody fingers” and told that “he has a *right* to make me a slave!” In view of all the facts, Langston concluded, he would always “fall back upon those last defenses of our rights which cannot be taken from us, and which God gave us, that we need not be slaves.” African Americans would no longer be found “meekly submitting to the penalties of an infamous law.”<sup>26</sup>

Though John Langston’s legal eloquence was described as being “distinguished by the highest moral tone...delivered in captivating, attractive style and

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<sup>25</sup> *Liberator*, June 3, 1859; *New York Times*, May 17, 1859; *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 25, 1859.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

manner,” it was the words of his brother that turned out to be, in John’s words, the most “powerful and matchless address, wonderful in the breadth of his views, masterly and unanswerable in his logic and law, and commanding and irresistible in its delivery and effects.”<sup>27</sup> At the end of the speech, the packed courtroom erupted into cheers and applause. Once order was restored, the judge charged Langston with having done “injustice to the Court,” though his wrong lay only in thinking that nothing he could have said could mitigate his sentence. The judge had been so moved by the defendant that he sentenced him to the “comparatively light” punishment of twenty days in jail and court costs. Even this slap on the wrist prompted John Langston to wonder “how the United States officials will collect the fines imposed upon these men.”<sup>28</sup>

Langston wrote that his brother’s speech had “carried this case to the ends of the earth, and immortalized not only the name of its author, but impressed his sentiments of liberty, justice, humanity, and sound religious duty, as illustrated in the teachings of Christ, upon every hearer and reader of his words.” As a spokesman “in the interest of the Abolition cause, at the time and under the circumstances,” the younger Langston declared his brother “without doubt, the best qualified man of his race for such service.”<sup>29</sup> The speech was also reprinted in journals across the country, from the Western Reserve to New England.<sup>30</sup> William C. Nell and Lewis Hayden offered resolutions before a meeting of Boston African Americans “commend[ing] to the reading of the entire nation the manly, thrilling, and eloquent speech of Charles H. Langston...deserving high prominence in the annals of this the second revolution for liberty in the United States.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 187.

<sup>28</sup> Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 332.

<sup>29</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 187-188.

<sup>30</sup> See *Liberator*, June 3, 1859; *New York Times*, May 17, 1859; *Cleveland Leader*, May 13, 1859.

<sup>31</sup> *Liberator*, June 10, 1859.

Still, the Rescuers remained in jail, resolved to suffer together until freed by the “due course of law” and refused any terms “short of a righting by the Court of the indignity and wrong which they had suffered at its hand.”<sup>32</sup> Their first application for a writ of *habeas corpus* was denied in April when the Supreme Court of Ohio upheld the Fugitive Slave Law under which the men were held to be perfectly constitutional.<sup>33</sup> However, by mid-May, the indictments of all the men from Wellington had been nulled, the District Attorney having admitted that he viewed their cases differently than the Oberlinites who traveled several miles just to rescue the former slave.<sup>34</sup> This left only the Oberlin men imprisoned, and cleared the way, as Henry Peck noted, “for the prosecution to work that spite against the Anti-Slavery sentiment of Oberlin, which its enemies have long entertained, and which they have often threatened to gratify.”<sup>35</sup> Almost immediately, the court then went into recess until the July term. This resulted in another two months of confinement for the prisoners in the sweltering Cleveland jail. At this point, another *habeas corpus* proceeding was initiated on behalf of Langston and Bushnell, this time by the state Attorney General Christopher Wolcott.<sup>36</sup>

Wolcott closed his address to the full Supreme Court by alerting them that “Weightier consequences never hung upon the arbitrament of any tribunal.” He argued that “The strain of the Federal system has come, and your honors are to determine, at least for the citizens of Ohio, whether under that system there can be any

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<sup>32</sup> H.E. Peck, in *Douglass' Monthly*, June, 1859; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 89.

<sup>33</sup> *Ohio State Journal*, April 26, 27, 1859; *New York Times*, April 27, 29, 1859; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 110-13.

<sup>34</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 125-126.

<sup>35</sup> H.E. Peck, in *Douglass' Monthly*, June, 1859. One unnamed Rescuer noted in late April that the Cleveland jail then contained “some fifty-five prisoners, classified as follows: Horse thief, 1; counterfeiting, 1; murder, 1; drunkenness, 1; assault and battery, 1; grand larceny, 7; petit larceny, 8; burglary, 3; and believing in the higher law, 20.” *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, April 30, 1859.

<sup>36</sup> Fairchild, “Wellington Rescue,” 29; Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 115-116; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 195-225.



adequate protection for the reserved rights of the states, or any sufficient safeguards for the liberty of the citizen. The cause of constitutional government is here and now on trial. God grant it a safe deliverance.”<sup>37</sup> By a vote of three to two, however, it was not so delivered.<sup>38</sup>



**Illustration 10.2: The Oberlin Rescuers**

**(from left to right: Jacob Shipherd, O.S.B. Wall, Loring Wadsworth, David Watson, Wilson Bruce Evans, Eli Boies, Ralph Plumb, Henry Evans, Simeon Bushnell, John Scott, Matthew Gillette, Charles Langston, Ansel Lyman, James Bartlett, William Lincoln, Richard Winsor, John Watson, James Fitch, Henry Peck, and Daniel Williams**

**(Oberlin College Archives)**

Many observers had by this time begun to agree with the imprisoned Oberlin men that the national administration was not so interested in upholding the Fugitive Slave Law as it was intent on punishing Western abolitionism's most powerful

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<sup>37</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 225.

<sup>38</sup> *New York Times*, April 29, May 3, June 3, 1859; *New York Evangelist*, May 5, June 16, 1859; *New York Tribune*, n.d., in *Liberator*, May 6, 1859; *Liberator*, June 10, 1859; *Oberlin Evangelist*, June 8, 1859; Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 116.

symbol, Oberlin. The *Oberlin Evangelist* realized that “Oberlin stands conspicuous for its hatred of oppression and its love of liberty.” The editor remarked that the “bitter war against Oberlinites is only a deadly blow aimed at the very vitality of liberty. Proslavery federal usurpation cares nothing for Oberlin as such. It is her *love of liberty and hatred of oppression that must be crushed out.*”<sup>39</sup> This was not simply paranoia, either. The *Norwalk Reflector*, *Cleveland Herald*, *Ashtabula Sentinel*, *Cleveland Independent Democrat*, *Portage County Democrat*, *Western Reserve Chronicle*, and *Ohio State Journal* all published similar editorials in May of 1859. The *Cleveland Leader* concluded that “No intelligent man can resist the conviction that this is a political trial, with no other object than to make political capital for a set of fellows in Northern Ohio who use this as a means of advancing their party against the Republicans generally.”<sup>40</sup>

The Democratic press was no less convinced, and did all that they could to tie the persecution of Oberlin to the Republican Party and political antislavery in general. “Oberlinism,” the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* concluded, “was Abolitionism boiled down to the quintessence of bitterness.”<sup>41</sup> According to the *Ohio Statesman*, the convictions “would have a very salutary effect on the ferocious abolitionists of that classic vicinity...The Republican Party has seen the day of its utmost fervor and strength, and its decline will now be rapid.”<sup>42</sup> All these suspicions were confirmed after the Wellington prisoners were released. “The Oberlinites are the ones the Government wishes to punish,” the District Attorney flatly declared, “We mean to make a point of Oberlin.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 25, 1859; See also *Norwalk Reflector*, May 17, 1859, excerpted in Cochran, *The Western Reserve*, 157.

<sup>40</sup> *Cleveland Leader*, April \_\_, 1859, excerpted in Cochran, *The Western Reserve*, 158.

<sup>41</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 7, 1859.

<sup>42</sup> *Ohio Statesman*, April \_\_, 1859, excerpted in Cochran, *The Western Reserve*, 157.

<sup>43</sup> *Douglass' Monthly*, June, 1859; Cochran, *The Western Reserve*, 156-157.

## ***UNTIL THE GREAT RESULT BE ACOMPLISHED***

While the second *habeas corpus* case was still pending, a mass Republican convention was called to meet just outside the Cleveland jail to capitalize on the Rescuers' plight.<sup>44</sup> On May 24, a crowd estimated at 12,000 people, including a delegation of approximately 1,300 from Oberlin (nearly two thirds of the town's population), gathered in the public square to hear speeches and addresses from antislavery dignitaries including Joshua Giddings, Benjamin Wade, Salmon Chase, Kentucky's Cassius Clay, and other "worthies of the Anti-Slavery Movement."<sup>45</sup> Oberlin's contingent marched in step with their own famous Oberlin Brass Band "playing the 'Marseillaise,'" with an elderly abolitionist "bearing aloft the 'stars and stripes' with the inscription '1776.'"<sup>46</sup>

James Fairchild pronounced many of the speeches that day to have been "radical, almost revolutionary."<sup>47</sup> Giddings pledged to all present "that so long as I have life and health, I will use all my influence and all legal means to oppose the execution of this [Fugitive] law. And when all such means fail, then so long as I have strength to raise and wield an arm, so long I will resist unto death, and will work and pray for liberty with my last breath."<sup>48</sup> John Langston announced from the same platform that "he hated the Fugitive Slave Law as he did the Democratic Party, with a deep, unalterable hatred." A conservative Cleveland newspaper even offered Langston an offhanded compliment when it wrote that his listeners "forgot that he was

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<sup>44</sup> *New York Times*, May 17, 1859; *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, May 12, 1859.

<sup>45</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 188; *New York Times*, May 12, 28, 1859; *The National Era*, June 9, 1859; Fairchild, "Wellington Rescue," 30; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 247, 257.

<sup>46</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 248.

<sup>47</sup> Fairchild, "Wellington Rescue," 31; Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 117-118.

<sup>48</sup> Fairchild, "Wellington Rescue," 31. Giddings' letter to Ralph Plumb (published in the *Liberator*), was even more radical. See Joshua R. Giddings to Ralph Plumb, May 4, 1859, in *Liberator*, May 9, 27, 1859; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 252-253.

a black man—he spoke a white language, such as few white men can speak.”

Langston reached out to his largely white audience and demanded of them that

If you hate slavery because it oppresses the black man in the Southern States, for God’s sake hate it for its enslavement of white men. Don’t say that it is confined to the South—here it is on our neighbors and citizens, and shall we say that slavery does not affect us? As we love our friends, as we love our God-given rights, as we love our homes, as we love ourselves, as we love our God, let us this afternoon swear eternal enmity to this law. Exhaust the law first for these men, but if this fail, for God’s sake let us fall back upon our own natural rights and say to the prison walls ‘come down,’ and set these men at liberty.

[Cheers.]<sup>49</sup>

To this, Asa Mahan rose to give thanks that the Oberlin men in and out of the prison, “whom he had instructed in years past and taught them principles of liberty, were still true to their duty.” Their actions assured him “that he had not lived in vain.”<sup>50</sup>

Incredibly, the gathering was so close to the jail’s fence that rescuers including Professor Henry Peck, Ralph Plumb, James Fitch, and Charles Langston were able to address the crowd themselves and participate in the proceedings.<sup>51</sup> As delegates outside the walls listened, the Oberlin band was allowed into the yard to give a special concert for the prisoners. Even more special was the visit of nearly 400 of the Sabbath School students of James Fitch to pay respects to their superintendent. They carried a banner emblazoned with the very words Fitch had taught them on Sundays, the

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<sup>49</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 189; See also Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 256.

<sup>50</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 256. Mahan had left Oberlin in 1850 to found Cleveland University. In 1859 he was president of Adrian College in Michigan.

<sup>51</sup> Fairchild, “Wellington Rescue,” 31; Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 117; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 257-259.

appropriate “Stand up for Jesus.” A “throng of little feet...pressed the prison floor,” and the entire jail was filled with the sounds of happy children declaring their love for their teacher. Fitch’s parting instructions were for his pupils to “DO RIGHT! ALWAYS DO RIGHT! Nothing shall by any means harm you if ye be doers of THAT WHICH IS RIGHT!”<sup>52</sup>

The day’s rally was concluded with the passage of a series of declarations condemning the government of the United States, “as recently administered” and its “history of repeated injustices and usurpations.” They affirmed the doctrine of states rights, excoriated the “void” Fugitive Slave Law, and decried the subservience of the general government to the Slave Power.<sup>53</sup> Importantly, the meeting, led and addressed by many of the most powerful leaders of the national Republican Party, including, perhaps for the first time, an African American platform speaker, declared that “the chief reliance of freedom in the American Republic rests in the great Republican party.” Stimulated “by the wrongs and outrages which were the immediate occasion of this vast assemblage, as by the late triumphs of the people over federal power and corruption,” the rally declared it “the manifest duty of Republicans everywhere to renew their united efforts with an energy not to be remitted until that great result be accomplished.”<sup>54</sup>

While the Oberlin prisoners baked in the Cleveland jail, they passed the six weeks as productively as possible. The jailer, a man about whom an Oberlin gathering declared “God made a man before he made a jailer,” allowed the Rescuers an incredible amount of freedom while imprisoned.<sup>55</sup> Though he fulfilled his duty to

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<sup>52</sup> *Cleveland Leader*, n.d., in Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 259-61; *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 13, 1859.

<sup>53</sup> *The National Era*, June 9, 1859; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 253-254.

<sup>54</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 254; See also Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 340.

<sup>55</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 89-90; Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 119; Fairchild, “Wellington Rescue,” 34.

keep the Oberlinites within the prison walls, John B. Smith allowed them use of his own apartment in the prison, as well as the adjoining furnished rooms. When many of the Rescuers' wives expressed a desire to share their husbands' imprisonment, Smith agreed and helped make their terms as comfortable as possible. Students were allowed to receive their schoolbooks from visitors, and they continued their studies without interruption, no doubt aided by the presence of one of their esteemed professors sharing their incarceration.<sup>56</sup> James Fitch obtained a printing press, and with the help of his colleagues, established an abolitionist newspaper, *The Rescuer*.<sup>57</sup> The different mechanics procured tools and materials and continued their work as best possible, and advertised their wares in the pages of *The Rescuer*, while Henry Peck gave sermons on "Higher Law" to as many visitors as could pack the jail and the audible area outside.<sup>58</sup> One visitor expressed his surprised belief that "President Buchanan hardly holds greater levees than did these men on Saturday afternoon."<sup>59</sup>

Besides *The Rescuer*, the Oberlin prisoners and their friends did everything that they could to keep the case before the public eye. They posed in the prison yard for the cover photograph for the May issue of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, and they also kept a flurry of letters in the post to abolitionists and various antislavery newspapers.<sup>60</sup> Those friends on the outside wrote public letters and articles, and gave countless speeches on behalf of the imprisoned.<sup>61</sup> Abolitionists in Oberlin and elsewhere across Ohio founded chapters of the revolutionary "Sons of Liberty," who,

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<sup>56</sup> *Cleveland Leader*, April 19, 1859, in Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 93; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 262; Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 119; Fairchild, "Wellington Rescue," 34.

<sup>57</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 262.

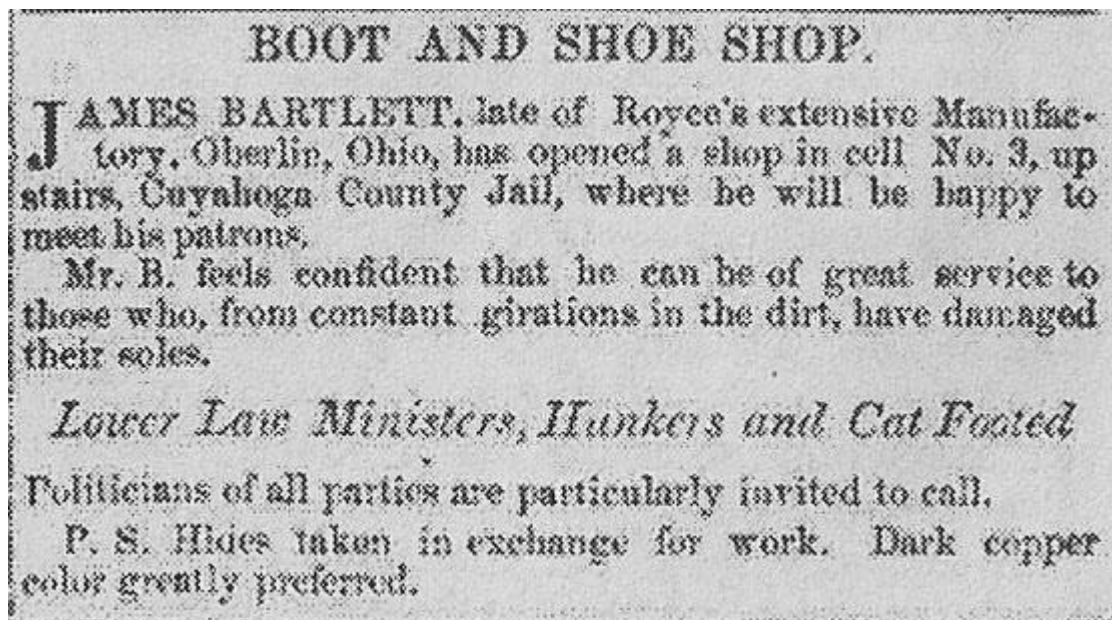
<sup>58</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 262-263; *Cleveland Herald*, April 18, 1859, in *ibid.*, 90-92.

<sup>59</sup> *Cleveland Leader*, April 19, 1859, in Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 92.

<sup>60</sup> *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, May 7, 1859; See also Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 90; *Cleveland Leader*, April 19, 1859, in *ibid.*, 93; *Douglass' Monthly*, June, 1859; *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, December 17, 1858, April 30, May 14, 1859; *Liberator*, January 28, 1859.

<sup>61</sup> The Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society sponsored over 300 lectures in 1859 to "people of all classes." See Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 333-334.

like their forefathers who tossed tea into Boston Harbor and upheld a popular movement for freedom, pledged themselves to even more strenuous resistance to even more intolerable government usurpations.<sup>62</sup> Oberlin and other Lorain County “Sons” made banners emblazoned with the slogans “Here is the Government, Let Tyrants Beware” and “Resistance to Tyrants, Obedience to God!”<sup>63</sup>



**Illustration 10.3: Ad from *The Rescuer***

However, before a second issue of *The Rescuer* could make the press, the Lorain County court of common pleas acted. Stymied by the decisions of the Ohio Supreme Court that denied *habeas corpus* to its citizens, Lorain County Judge James Carpenter, on the request of several Oberlin representatives, did the next best thing: he issued his own indictments—charges of kidnapping against all those involved in the capture of John Price. This would have forced the Southerners to face a Lorain County jury, one made up of “fanatics and Abolitionists,” who would supposedly be

<sup>62</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 244-247.

<sup>63</sup> *New York Times*, June 24, 1859; *Lorain County Eagle*, May 25, 1859; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 248.

“vigorously instructed in the doctrine of the unconstitutionality of the Fugitive Slave law.”<sup>64</sup> This move set off intense discussions between officers of the two courts and of all the parties involved, and ultimately resulted in a prisoner exchange—Kentuckians for Oberlinites.<sup>65</sup> So ended, as one Oberlin man said, “the most stupendous, unjustifiable and outrageous proceeding ever presented and prosecuted against any American citizens.”<sup>66</sup>

A Cleveland Democratic newspaperman expressed his disgusted astonishment at the deal, and sympathized with the Kentuckians. The editor of the *Plain Dealer*, “Finding no law in Lorain but the higher law, and seeing the determination of the sheriff, judge, and jury to send them to the penitentiary anyway,” lamented the repercussions that would undoubtedly soon follow. The federal government, he wrote, “has been beaten at least, with law, justice, and facts all on its side; and Oberlin, with its rebellious Higher Law creed, is triumphant.” Fearing the worst, he concluded, “The precedent is a bad one.”<sup>67</sup>

Back in Oberlin, abolitionists agreed with the *Plain Dealer*’s assessment that the Fugitive Law had been defeated, but not with its gloomy assumptions. “At last the Higher Law was triumphant!” John Langston wrote excitedly.<sup>68</sup> At the news, hundreds of guns were fired off into the air near Cleveland’s lakeshore, and “Hecker’s band” played “Home, Sweet Home” as it led the procession of the Oberlin prisoners to

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<sup>64</sup> Fairchild, “Wellington Rescue,” 34; *New York Times*, April 27, 1859; *Cleveland Herald*, July 6, 1859, in *Douglass’ Monthly*, August, 1859; Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 119; Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 189-190.

<sup>65</sup> *New York Tribune*, n.d., in *Liberator*, May 6, 1859; *New York Times*, April 27, July 7, 9, 1859; *The Ripley Bee*, August 6, 1859; Fairchild, *The Underground Railroad*, 120; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 263. Anderson Jennings soon returned to Kentucky where he hoped to be elected to the state legislature on the strength of his “Oberlin martyrdom.” He lost, running far behind his ticket.

<sup>66</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 190.

<sup>67</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, July 6, 1858, in *Liberator*, July 22, 1859.

<sup>68</sup> See also *Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal*, April 27, 1859; *Cleveland Morning Leader*, n.d., in *New York Times*, July 9, 1859; Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 190.



the train depot for their long awaited ride home.<sup>69</sup> There, they were welcomed back in high style. The Fire Company and Hook and Ladder team marched in sharp uniform behind the Oberlin Brass Band from the Oberlin depot to First Church where prayers and speeches were offered.

The nationwide press reported on the July 6<sup>th</sup> “Great Oberlin Jubilee” that followed. Until midnight, a crowd of nearly 3,000 joined to celebrate the Rescuers. First Church resonated with the notes of a 125 voice choir, and many of the former prisoners offered impassioned and triumphant speeches of gratitude.<sup>70</sup> In place of his brother, who could not attend the Oberlin gathering, John Langston offered “high and proud tribute” for Charles’ speech before the Cleveland court, and tendered some “fearless and startling words” of his own in opposition to the Fugitive Law. He thanked all of those involved at all stages in the process, “in his character as a negro—as a white man—as one in whom the blood of both races joined—as a *man*—and as an American citizen.” One newspaper correspondent wished that the entire world could have witnessed Oberlin’s celebration, with abolitionists, young and old, African American and white, “pouring forth...noble, manlike and godlike thoughts.”<sup>71</sup> Oberlin’s excitement had hardly subsided when Sim Bushnell was finally released on July 11<sup>th</sup>, setting off another round of merriment no less intense than the first.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Cleveland *Morning Leader*, n.d., in *New York Times*, July 9, 1859; Fairchild, “Wellington Rescue,” 35; Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 190.

<sup>70</sup> *New York Times*, July 11, 19, 1859; *New York Observer and Chronicle*, July 14, 1859; *New York Evangelist*, July 21, 1859; *Newark (Ohio) Advocate*, July 20, 1859; *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, July 7, 1859; Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 190.

<sup>71</sup> *Liberator*, July 22, 1859; *Cleveland Leader*, July 13, 1859, in *Liberator*, July 22, 1859; Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 190.

<sup>72</sup> *Cleveland Leader*, July 13, 1859, in *Liberator*, July 22, 1859; *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, July 12, 1859, excerpted in Cochran, *The Western Reserve*, 203.

### ***“A PERFECT REVIVAL OF ANTI-SLAVERY ZEAL”***

John Langston concluded that the events of the Oberlin-Wellington rescue unmistakably announced that the downfall of slavery was at hand.<sup>73</sup> The case was the crowning insult in a long line of Fugitive Slave Law cases, and it capped the Northern indignation that had been steadily accumulating with each one since 1850. As Langston’s biographers note, the perceived threat to liberty and self-governance that took firm hold of the Northern consciousness reached its peak in 1858. The fugitive law, the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, “Bloody Kansas,” “Bloody Sumner,” *Dred Scott*, the increasingly audacious and fiery rhetoric of proslavery Southerners, and countless other affronts gave tangible form to the arguments of abolitionists and Republicans that the South was determined to force slavery onto the entire country and would stop at nothing to control the government in its behalf. The Oberlin-Wellington rescue case was an unmistakable example before the North of the Slave Power’s crusade to destroy America’s fundamental republican values.<sup>74</sup>

Though the antislavery spirit remained largely concerned with the sanctity of the rights of white men, those privileged men “had determined that the enemy of their freedom must die.” John Langston, however, appreciated that “In its death, it was easy to discover the approaching life of negro freedom.”<sup>75</sup> A friend of Rescuer Henry Peck from Michigan told him about the “perfect *revival* of anti-slavery zeal in that state in consequence of [the Rescuers’] troubles,” and even William Lloyd Garrison weighed in on the great importance of the rescue in shaping public opinion in a letter to James Monroe: “this very prosecution,” he wrote, “will give a fresh impetus to our

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<sup>73</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 188.

<sup>74</sup> Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 336-337; See also Cochran, *The Western Reserve*, 200-202.

<sup>75</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 188.

noble cause.”<sup>76</sup> Moreover, the African American contribution to the escalation of antislavery sentiment could no longer be avoided. The editors of the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* recognized that African Americans’ “moral power” on the question was not exceeded by any other class, and went on to suggest that they carried in their hands “the key of our American Bastille.”<sup>77</sup>

Ohio Republicans were certainly revitalized by the Rescue hullabaloo. Just days after the Ohio Supreme Court denied the Rescuers’ second *habeas corpus* request, the state Republican Party commenced its annual convention in Columbus. The 1859 convention drew its highest attendance ever, of whom many delegates were men determined to nominate a strong, more radical ticket and wrest the platform away from conservatives.<sup>78</sup> Lorain County’s cadre, headed by Professor James Monroe, led the way in expressing “the indignation of Republicans” by refusing the renomination of Chief Justice Swan, a “cowardly and miserable sham conservative” who had delivered the majority opinion against the *habeas corpus* appeal by upholding the constitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Law.<sup>79</sup> The majority of delegates felt that the renomination of Swan was equivalent to endorsing the Fugitive Law, which radicals like Monroe “had determined to make the principal point of attack.”<sup>80</sup>

Even though the state platform was partly inspired by the Supreme Court’s decision in the Rescue case, it still fell short of the standards of most Oberlinites by not explicitly guaranteeing African American citizenship rights and suffrage.

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<sup>76</sup> William Lloyd Garrison to James Monroe, April 22, 1859, in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, Vol. IV, ed. Louis Ruchames (Cambridge, 1975), 622-623.

<sup>77</sup> *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, December 4, 1858.

<sup>78</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, June 8, 1859; Cochran, *The Western Reserve*, 192-193.

<sup>79</sup> *Summit County Beacon*, June \_\_, 1859, excerpted in Cochran, *The Western Reserve*, 191; *Oberlin Evangelist*, June 9, 1859; Samuel Galloway to Abraham Lincoln, July 23, 1859, Abraham Lincoln papers, LOC, at [www.memory.loc.gov](http://www.memory.loc.gov) (accessed March 3, 2009); Cochran, *The Western Reserve*, 190, 193.

<sup>80</sup> *Ashtabula Sentinel*, July 21, 1859, and n.d., excerpted in Cochran, *The Western Reserve*, 193; Samuel Galloway to Abraham Lincoln, July 23, 1859, Abraham Lincoln papers, LOC, at [www.memory.loc.gov](http://www.memory.loc.gov) (accessed March 3, 2009); See also *Oberlin Evangelist*, June 8, 1859.

Nonetheless, most were pleased with the party's insistence on the repeal of Fugitive Act. It was the most radical stance yet taken by the young state organization, and James Fitch expressed his conviction to a correspondent in New York that "The weak back of our Republican Party in Ohio has been strengthened."<sup>81</sup>

In June, over 1,200 Western Reserve Republicans met in Oberlin to hear reports of the Columbus convention and listen to addresses by Monroe, Joshua Giddings, and John Langston. The multi-racial aspect of the speakers' platform was also reflected in the Oberlin crowd, who, no doubt, were used to such an innovation by that point. The conservative *Ohio Statesman* reported that "The white and colored Republicans were mixed up in the meeting, Sambo spreading himself and participating largely in the meeting. We do not wonder that the colored Republicans at Oberlin were happy on the occasion. They certainly had a great triumph at the State Convention."<sup>82</sup>

Ohio's antislavery voters had been waiting impatiently since the Rescue trials began to express their righteous indignation through the ballot box. Indeed, it seemed that at each setback in the proceedings, many of the more progressive papers held out this avenue of redress as a manifest duty. At the nadir in the Rescue trials in May, the *Cleveland Leader* instructed its readers that "The free people can only take an appeal through the ballot boxes, State and National. This they will do. The struggle between Freedom and Slavery, Liberty and Despotism is but begun."<sup>83</sup> Regarding those

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<sup>81</sup> Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 339; See also Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York, 1970), 136-137.

<sup>82</sup> Democrats warned of the Republican momentum. The *Ohio Statesman* warned that if the laboring white men of the state did not unite "to put down the fanaticism of Republicanism," then they may soon see the day "when the Negro of Ohio will vote with the Chases, Dennisons, Giddingses, and the Oberlin School generally, to vote them down at the ballot box." *Ohio Statesman*, n.d., in *Newark Advocate*, June 29, 1859.

<sup>83</sup> *Cleveland Leader*, May 31, 1859, excerpted in Cochran, *The Western Reserve*, 190.

elected officials who publicly opposed the progression of liberty, even the conservative *Painesville Telegraph* wrote “God help them in their blindness.”<sup>84</sup>

An estimated 74.5% of eligible Ohioans turned out to vote in October of 1859, more than ever in the history of Ohio’s state elections to that point. Republican William Dennison won by a majority of 13,236, a vote total almost 24,000 higher than Salmon P. Chase had polled just two years earlier. The Western Reserve sent a cadre of antislavery men to the state senate, including the “Radical Triumvirate” of Oberlin alum Jacob D. Cox, Professor James Monroe, and future president James Garfield, who in turn helped send Chase to Washington as Ohio’s senator to join Ben Wade in 1860.<sup>85</sup> It truly seemed, as one Western Reserve Republican put it, “the Democracy have nothing left to do but to catch runaway fugitives.”<sup>86</sup>

### ***FOR THE CAUSE OF FREEDOM***

The events of 1858 and 1859 had fully convinced Oberlin African Americans that the coming struggle for freedom would and must include them as well. John Langston could say with authority to a Xenia, Ohio audience in 1858 that the abolitionist movement “knows no complexional bounds.” “This identification of the interests of the white and colored people of the country,” he said, “this particularly national feature of the anti-slavery movement, is one of its most cheering, hope-inspiring, and hope-supporting characteristics.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *Painesville Telegraph*, June 2, 1859, excerpted in Cochran, *The Western Reserve*, 191.

<sup>85</sup> See B.A. Hinsdale, *The Republican Text-Book for the Campaign of 1880: A Full History of General James A. Garfield's Public Life, With Other Political Information* (New York, 1880), 15; Cochran, *The Western Reserve*, 206-209.

<sup>86</sup> *History of the Republican Party in Ohio*, Vol.I, ed. Joseph P. Smith (Chicago, 1898), 91-92.

<sup>87</sup> John Mercer Langston, “The World’s Anti-Slavery Movement,” in *Freedom and Citizenship: Selected Lectures and Addresses of Hon. John Mercer Langston, LLD, U.S. Minister Resident at Haiti* (Washington, 1883), 65.

One particular man who had always identified the interests of all races as one was former tanner, sheep herder, surveyor, and Kansas freedom fighter John Brown. Brown's family had moved to the Western Reserve when he was five years old, and the boy grew up in a strict religious, abolitionist household. John's father, Owen Brown, had been a founding member of the Western Reserve Anti-Slavery Society, as well as a Trustee of Oberlin Collegiate Institute. His was one of the votes in favor of the admission of students "irrespective of color," and in 1841, Owen had arranged for John to survey several thousand acres of Virginia land that Gerrit Smith had donated to the Oberlin Institute.<sup>88</sup>

His abolitionist pedigree contributed to his involvement at an early age in the Underground Railroad, and in 1837, Brown dedicated his life to the abolition of slavery.<sup>89</sup> He was the most (in)famous of the free soil fighters in Kansas in the mid 1850s, and by 1857, he had developed a plan for "troubling Israel," that is, the South itself, over the slavery issue. Brown revealed to his closest confidants that he planned "to make an incursion into the Southern states, somewhere in the mountainous regions of the Blue Ridge and the Alleghenies," and hinted at some large-scale Underground venture.<sup>90</sup> The final plan would be an assault upon the Federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, after which slaves, who Brown assumed would rush to his aid, would be armed and sent back into the mountains as a guerilla force to free more of their brethren and repay in kind slave owners for the miseries they had inflicted on other men.

In 1858, John Brown busied himself planning a revolutionary provisional government to be put into place after the successful capture of the Harper's Ferry

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<sup>88</sup> Steven B. Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (New York, 1970), 1-18; David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist* (New York, 2005), 15-39.

<sup>89</sup> Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 41-42; Reynolds, *John Brown*, 37, 65.

<sup>90</sup> Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood*, 221.

arsenal and the establishment of an African American state in the surrounding countryside. He called a meeting in Chatham, Canada, for May 8<sup>th</sup> to lay out the outlines of his plan, ratify a constitution, and elect officers. It is probable that John Langston and several others with Oberlin connections were invited, and at least three made it to the meeting and affixed their names, “John Hancock bold and strong,” as Oberlin African American graduate James M. Jones described it, to Brown’s “Provisional Constitution.”<sup>91</sup> It read in part:

We...the Representatives of the circumscribed citizens of the United States of America, in General Congress assembled, appealing to the supreme Judge of the World, for the rectitude of our intentions, Do in the name, & by authority of the oppressed Citizens of the Slave States, Solemnly publish and Declare: that the Slaves are, & of right ought to be as free & as independent as the unchangeable Law of God requires that All Men Shall be...We mutually pledge to each other, Our Lives, and Our sacred Honor.<sup>92</sup>

Delegates to the meeting were deemed the parliament of the provisional government; Brown was elected Commander-in-Chief.<sup>93</sup>

After the Chatham meeting, Brown’s Constitution was taken to St. Catharines, Canada West, to William Howard Day’s printing shop.<sup>94</sup> Day had moved from Ohio to Canada to work with African American refugees at the St. Catharines terminus of

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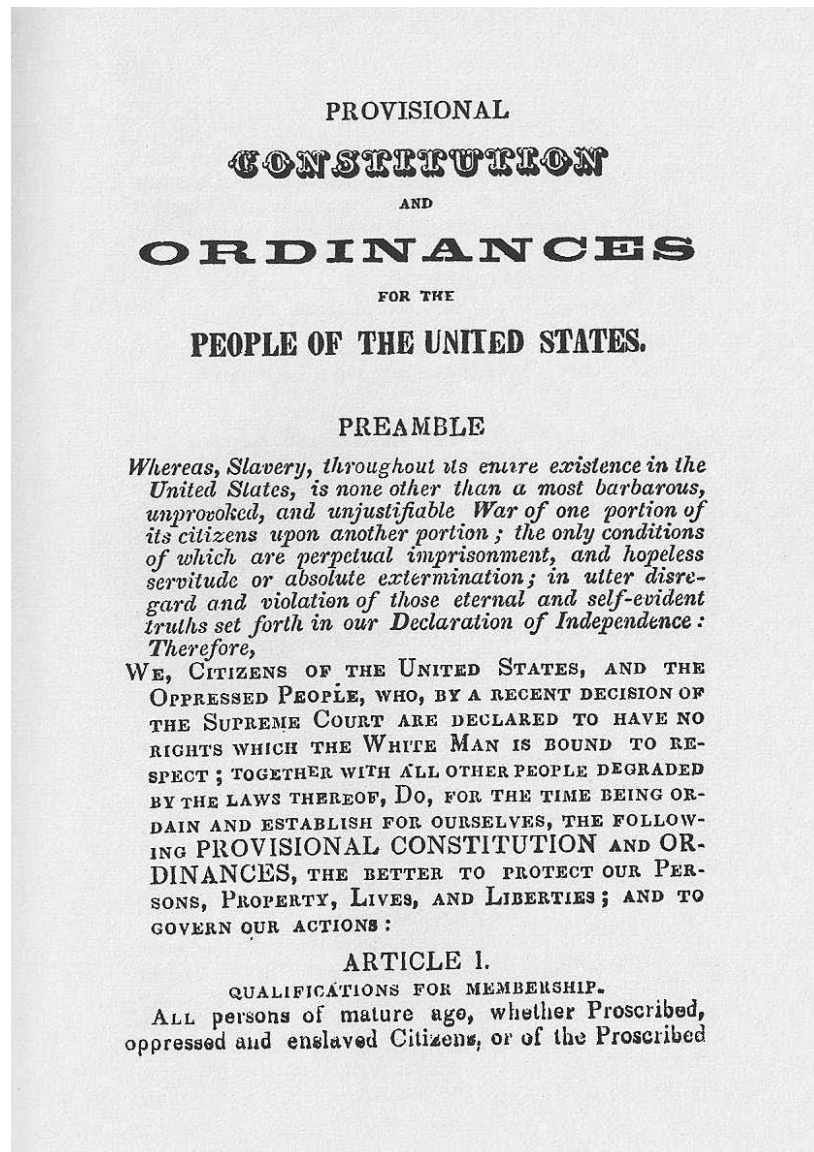
<sup>91</sup> Richard J. Hinton, *John Brown and his Men* (New York, 1894), vii, 178; Reynolds, *John Brown*, 262-263; Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 350; W.E.B. DuBois, *John Brown: A Biography* (New York, 1997), 129. These men were James Monroe Jones, James H. Harris, and George J. Reynolds.

<sup>92</sup> John Brown, *Provisional Constitution and Ordinances of the People of the United States*, ed. with preface by Boyd B. Stutler (Weston, MA, 1969), 1.

<sup>93</sup> Brown, *Provisional Constitution*, 8-10.

<sup>94</sup> DuBois, *John Brown*, 135; Brown, *Provisional Constitution*, 4. DuBois says that Kagi took the document to Hamilton, Canada to be printed, but Stutler’s evidence clearly shows that Day was the printer, and he did the work in St. Catharines.

the Underground Railroad, and had likely been a confidant of Brown either during his Oberlin days in the 1840s or through his work with Ohio's abolitionist movement.



**Illustration 10.4: Front page of John Brown's Provisional Constitution, printed by William Howard Day**

Day's name appears in Brown's pocket notebook in February 1858 as "W.H. Day, Chairman, C.W.," and only lack of funds, Day wrote Brown, kept him from attending



the Chatham meeting.<sup>95</sup> Day set Brown's Constitution in fifteen pages of type, carefully hand stitching each copy. Even more carefully he published the document with no title page—no printer, and importantly, no author.<sup>96</sup>

Brown's attack was delayed after some of his plans were exposed by an associate in Ohio. Unable to immediately proceed from Canada to Virginia, Brown returned to Kansas for another year of slave-raiding in Missouri.<sup>97</sup> In March of 1859, however, John Brown was in Cleveland, arriving just prior to the commencement of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue trials. He was returning from Canada with the horses he had just used to help liberate eleven Missouri slaves.<sup>98</sup> Brown was in the Reserve for nearly two weeks, and during that time, besides auctioning off all of his "confiscated" livestock (now good "abolitionist" horses), he also joined in the activity surrounding the trials of the Oberlin men then taking place.<sup>99</sup> Though Brown was already a known "outlaw" with a price on his head for his activities in Kansas, he walked fearlessly past U.S. Marshals in Cleveland, and even paid a visit to Charles Langston in jail.<sup>100</sup> He also gave a public lecture on the Fugitive Slave Law, audaciously telling his audience about his own recent Kansas to Canada rescue, and instructing those present that "it was the duty of every man to liberate slaves whenever

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<sup>95</sup> Brown, *Provisional Constitution*, 6-7; William Howard Day to John Brown, May 3, 1858, John Brown/Boyd Stutler Collection, West Virginia Archives, ID#RP02-198, [www.wvarchives.com](http://www.wvarchives.com), accessed August 27, 2009.

<sup>96</sup> Brown, *Provisional Constitution*, 3-4; See also John Brown Notebook No. 2, April 8, 13, 1858 for notations regarding Brown's payment to Day for his printing services. "Extracts referring to Canadian Contacts, April and May, 1858," John Brown/Boyd Stutler Collection, West Virginia Archives, ID#RP02-0197, [www.wvarchives.com](http://www.wvarchives.com), accessed August 27, 2009.

<sup>97</sup> Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 247-251; Brown, *Provisional Constitution*, 10.

<sup>98</sup> *Cincinnati Gazette*, n.d., in *Newark Advocate*, October 28, 1859. This was the same group of slaves that Brown had hidden in the home of his sister and brother-in-law, Samuel and Florella Brown Adair, in Kansas, just a few weeks earlier. See also Chapter Eight.

<sup>99</sup> *Cincinnati Gazette*, n.d., in *Newark Advocate*, October 28, 1859; *John Brown, Liberator of Kansas and Martyr of Virginia: Life and Letters*, ed. Franklin Benjamin Sanborn (Cedar Rapids, 1910), 494.

<sup>100</sup> Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 262; Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 352.

he could do so successfully.”<sup>101</sup> Among Brown’s hearers that day was an Oberlin Rescuer who had avoided indictment, Lewis Sheridan Leary.<sup>102</sup>

There were more overlaps between the Oberlin men and John Brown’s circle of friends during the Cleveland trials. John Henri Kagi, a reporter for the New York *Tribune* and Cleveland *Leader*, was a close friend of Brown who had fought with him in Kansas (once nursing him to health at the home of Samuel and Florealla Brown Adair).<sup>103</sup> Kagi was also an acquaintance of John Langston, and he gave more than just sympathetic coverage to the Rescuers’ plight.<sup>104</sup> On their request, Kagi traveled to Columbus so that he could give them first-hand accounts of the *habeas corpus* proceedings. When their request was denied, Kagi actually offered to orchestrate a jailbreak, a suggestion the Rescuers refused.<sup>105</sup> Another man, Charles P. Tidd (a.k.a. J.M. Greene), had been another of Brown’s lieutenants in Kansas, and though his role is not as clear, was sufficiently involved in the Rescue aftermath to merit special thanks in Jacob Shipherd’s compiled history of the proceedings.<sup>106</sup> Kagi, at least, was actively recruiting several of the Rescuers to join Brown’s band of liberators.<sup>107</sup>

Another man calling himself John Thomas was also recruiting men for Brown on the Reserve around the same time, and in Late August, he paid a visit to Oberlin. Thomas anxiously sought out John Langston, who had been lecturing on behalf of the Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society most of that month. When Langston arrived back in town, Thomas approached him and expressed his desire to discuss some business with him. As the men walked from Langston’s law office to his house, Thomas revealed

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<sup>101</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 22, 1859.

<sup>102</sup> *Cincinnati Gazette*, n.d., in *Newark Advocate*, October 28, 1859.

<sup>103</sup> Sanborn, *John Brown*, 252; Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood*, 257.

<sup>104</sup> J. Henri [Kagi] to Charles Tidd, May 8, 1859, in *Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts From January 1, 1836 to April 15, 1869; Preserved in the Capitol at Richmond*, Vol. XI, ed. H.W. Flourney (Richmond, 1893), 345-346.

<sup>105</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 192.

<sup>106</sup> Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, viii.

<sup>107</sup> I.H.H. to J. Henri [Kagi], August 22, 1859, in *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*, Vol. XI, 335.

his true identity to be John Brown, Jr., the son of “John Brown of Ossawattamie.” He informed Langston that he was in town to see him “upon matters strictly secret and confidential.” The elder Brown, he said, “proposes to strike at an early day, a blow, which shall shake and destroy American slavery itself.”<sup>108</sup>

At this, Langston invited the man into his house for dinner and full discussion of the matter afterward. After dining in Langston’s parlor, Brown disclosed his father’s plan for his assault on Harper’s Ferry, and asked his host for his assistance in finding and influencing “any men willing and ready to join in the enterprise, and, if need be, die in connection therewith, in an attempt to free the American slave.”<sup>109</sup> Though Langston feared Brown’s plan was bound to fail, he realized that it would nonetheless take the nation one step closer to the ultimate overthrow of slavery. Accordingly, he suggested two men whom he believed were willing to make the necessary “moral investments” Brown’s plot might demand of them: Lewis Sheridan Leary and John Copeland, Jr.<sup>110</sup>

Langston believed that “no man of greater physical courage could be found than Leary,” and commended Copeland for his role in John Price’s rescue as well as his committed work in Oberlin’s Underground Railroad.<sup>111</sup> Leary may have already been on board by this point, and his letters to Kagi from Oberlin show that he was solidly committed to Brown’s plan, and that he believed his nephew Copeland was “a hardy man, who is willing and every way competent to dig coal.”<sup>112</sup> In the same letter, Leary informed Kagi that he believed he could “get an outfit from parties

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<sup>108</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 191.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*, 191-192.

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, 196-198.

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.* 193-195; Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue*, 104-5, 126. Copeland refused to surrender himself after the Rescue indictments came down, and would remain “a fugitive from justice in Ohio” until his death.

<sup>112</sup> Here, Leary is using the group’s code language (“dig coal,” “the company,” etc.) to refer to their secret plans.

interested in our welfare in this place,” and he put faith in “Mr. P,” Rescuer Ralph Plumb, to assist in that effort.<sup>113</sup>



**Illustration 10.5: Lewis Sheridan Leary**  
(from Hinton, *John Brown and his Men* (1894))

John Brown, Jr. left Oberlin happy with the results of his visit. By the time all of Brown’s lieutenants had left the Western Reserve in late August (Brown, Sr. had left for Canada again by early April), they thought that they had four or five committed recruits, though Leary wanted to make sure his family in Oberlin was provided for before he joined them.<sup>114</sup> Charles Langston, who Brown, Jr. believed

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<sup>113</sup> L.S. Leary to J. Henri [Kagi], September 8, 1859, in *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*, Vol. XI, 305-306; See also Ralph Plumb to John Kagi, August 23, 1859, in *ibid.*, 314-315.

<sup>114</sup> I.H.H. to J. Henri [Kagi], August 22, 1859, in *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*, Vol. XI, 335; Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 194; Dubois, *John Brown*, 124. Leary said of his family, “Let me be assured that they will be cared for, protected; and if my child shall live, be suitably educated and trained to usefulness; and my life shall be accounted by me of the smallest value, as it is given, if need be, to free the slave.”

was also on board, paid a special visit to Leary some time in August, apparently to make sure the man maintained his enthusiasm for the cause.<sup>115</sup> John Langston and Plumb were also to be counted upon to “work hard.”<sup>116</sup>

Their expenses paid by Ralph and Samuel Plumb, Leary and Copeland left Oberlin in early October under the pretense of looking for extra work. They learned that Charles Langston was in Cleveland, and they stopped to consult with him there. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, they reached Brown’s rented farmhouse near Harper’s Ferry, Virginia.<sup>117</sup> That night, Brown told his men that the revolution would begin the next day. At 8 o’clock the night of the 16<sup>th</sup>, Brown announced, “Men, get on your arms; we will proceed to the Ferry.”<sup>118</sup>

From the beginning, the assault was a failure. The first casualty was actually an African American civilian, and when Brown allowed a train to pass by, word of the attack quickly spread. A force of Marines led by Robert E. Lee soon had the men surrounded in the Arsenal.<sup>119</sup> In the mayhem that followed, Sheridan Leary was shot and killed while attempting to swim the Shenandoah River.<sup>120</sup> John Copeland was with his kinsman as they attempted to escape the carnage, but was captured and barely avoided being lynched on the spot by Virginia troops.<sup>121</sup> A week later, Brown, Copeland, and three other survivors were indicted for treason, murder, and inciting

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<sup>115</sup> I.H.H. to J. Henri [Kagi], August 22, 1859, in *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*, Vol. XI, 335; John Brown, Jr. to Henri [Kagi], September 2, 1859, in *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*, Vol. XI, 326-327; Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 194.

<sup>116</sup> John Brown, Jr. to Henri [Kagi], September 2, 1859, in *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*, Vol. XI, 326-327.

<sup>117</sup> *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, October 31, 1859; *Newark Advocate*, November 4, 1859.

<sup>118</sup> Sanborn, *Life and Letters of John Brown*, 548.

<sup>119</sup> See Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 290-306.

<sup>120</sup> Leary’s widow, Mary Patterson Leary, would marry Charles Langston in 1868. One of her most treasured possessions was a blood stained and bullet-ridden shawl that had belonged to her husband and was sent to her after the Harper’s Ferry raid. Many years later, Mary Patterson Leary Langston would use the same shawl to wrap around her and Charles’ young grandson, Langston Hughes. See Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, Vol. 13, ed. Joseph McLaren (Columbia, MO, 2002), 37; Laurie F. Leach, *Langston Hughes: A Biography* (Westport, 2002), 2.

<sup>121</sup> John A. Copeland, Jr. to Addison M. Halbert, December 10, 1859, in *Liberator*, January 13, 1860; See also *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 21, 1859.

slaves to insurrection. According to *Dred Scott*, African Americans were not American citizens, and therefore could not be tried for treason, but though Copeland could not be charged with being a traitor, he and all the other defendants were sentenced to death for their roles in the attack.<sup>122</sup>

John Copeland used much of his time in prison writing to his family back in Oberlin. He urged his parents not to grieve his impending doom, but rather to “remember the *cause* in which I was engaged; *remember it was a holy cause*, one in which men in every way better than I am, have suffered and died.” “Remember,” he wrote, “that if I must die, I die in trying to liberate a few of my poor & oppressed people from a condition of servitude against which God in his word has hurled his most bitter denunciations.” He was content, he told his family, and believed that God was working through him to bring about a greater good.<sup>123</sup>

Once the actual perpetrators were sentenced and several “Oberlin” connections were uncovered, blame for the siege logically fell upon this bastion of abolitionism.<sup>124</sup> Several of its residents, including the Plumbs, were wanted for questioning by federal authorities for their roles in the events. One Philadelphia newspaper did not mince words in its accusations of guilt towards the college and town: “Oberlin is located in the very heart of what may be called the ‘John Brown tract’ where people are born abolitionists and where abolitionism is taught as the ‘chief end of man’ and often put in practice.” The town was “the nursery of just such men as John Brown and his followers,” and it was Oberlin in particular where “younger Browns attain their conscientiousness in ultraisms, taught from the cradle up, so that while they rob

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<sup>122</sup> Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 327-329.

<sup>123</sup> John A Copeland, Jr. to John A. Copeland, Sr. and Delilah Copeland, November 26, 1859, in *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 21, 1859.

<sup>124</sup> See Henry Peck to Lewis Tappan, November 17, 1859, AMA, Ohio, roll 9.

slaveholders of their property, or commit murder for the cause of freedom, they imagine they're doing God's service."<sup>125</sup>



**Illustration 10.6: John A. Copeland**  
(from Hinton, *John Brown and his Men* (1894))

Shocked, a few in Oberlin initially attempted to put as much distance between Brown and themselves as possible, and even the most avowed abolitionists admitted that they were “not perfectly unequivocal on the subject of John Brown’s career.”<sup>126</sup> African Americans from Oberlin, however, did not hesitate a moment in its praise of “the noble and Christ-like John Brown.”<sup>127</sup> Charles Langston even placed an ad in a Cleveland paper denouncing those who held back their support for Brown. Abolitionists like Gerrit Smith, John P. Hale, Giddings, and others had unequivocally

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<sup>125</sup> E.W. Phillips, *Oberlin: The Story of a Century* (Oberlin, 1933), 93-94.

<sup>126</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, November 9, December 21, 1859.

<sup>127</sup> Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 359.

denied their involvement in the scheme, but Langston, believing his reputation to be as valuable as those prominent white men, declared that “I must like them publish a card of denial...But what must I deny? I cannot deny that I feel the very deepest sympathy with the Immortal John Brown in his heroic and daring efforts to free the slaves.—To do this would be in my opinion more criminal than to urge the slaves to open rebellion.”<sup>128</sup>

On December 2, 1859, John Brown was executed. Despite the town’s earlier hesitancy to praise him, Oberlin commenced a period of deep mourning for the martyr and those that would follow him to the gallows in the days to come. At the time of the execution, the bells of First Church were tolled for an hour. Prayer meetings throughout the day were packed to capacity. Later that week, James Thome returned to his alma mater to deliver a funeral sermon for John Brown, after which money was raised to erect a monument to honor the Oberlin men who also lost their lives in Virginia.<sup>129</sup> Across the North, other alumni were among the countless abolitionists who praised Brown and swelled the antislavery tide.<sup>130</sup> As Oberlin alumna Antionette Brown declared from a New York City antislavery platform, “The John Browns would soon be as numerous as the John Smiths.”<sup>131</sup>

As many Oberlinites listened to Thome’s funeral sermon for John Brown in First Church, others prepared for the reception of John Copeland’s body and a funeral of his own.<sup>132</sup> James Monroe was sent to Virginia to attempt to retrieve the man’s corpse from the Winchester Medical College, where it was taken for dissection after

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<sup>128</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, November 18, 1859, excerpted in *From Bondage to Liberation: Writings By and About Afro-Americans From 1700 to 1918*, ed. Faith Berry (New York, 2001), 213-216. See also Marcus Dale to George Whipple, December 19, 1859, AMA archives, Ohio, microfilm roll 9.

<sup>129</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 21, 1859; *Oberlin Students’ Monthly*, January 1860, RG 30/24, FP, Box 18, Folder 11, OCA.

<sup>130</sup> See *New York Times*, December 5, 1859; *Weekly Anglo-African*, December 17, 1859.

<sup>131</sup> *New York Times*, December 5, 1859.

<sup>132</sup> Henry Prudden to “Loved ones at home,” December 17, 1859, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 4, OCA; John Copeland, Sr. to James Monroe, December 19, 1859, RG 30/22, James Monroe papers, Box 1, OCA.



the execution.<sup>133</sup> Though the governor of Virginia had sent a telegram authorizing the recovery, all along the way Virginia soldiers were posted looking for “‘*a damned abolitionist*.” If any were found who looked “as though they preferred liberty to Slavery,” they were seized and taken from the cars.<sup>134</sup> It was quickly apparent that Monroe’s errand into the South would end in failure.<sup>135</sup> When the expected train arrived in Oberlin without Copeland’s body, his father was heartbroken. One witness to his grief wrote that “it seemed to make him feel worse than the intelligence that his son was dead.”<sup>136</sup> Nonetheless, on Christmas Day, Henry Peck preached a funeral sermon in honor of Copeland and his “associate martyrdom” to 3,000 mourners in First Church.<sup>137</sup>

### ***THE APPROACH OF A CRUEL, DEADLY STORM***

At the turn of the New Year a week later, it seemed as if all Americans’ eyes were on the prize of the 1860 national elections. The Oberlin-Wellington Rescue and John Brown’s raid and execution had lit the political atmosphere on fire, and men and women from Oberlin put all of their mighty weight behind the Republican Party.<sup>138</sup> Despite the Party’s lingering conservatism, it remained, in the words of the *Oberlin*

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<sup>133</sup> John Copeland, Sr. to James Monroe, December 19, 1859, RG 30/22, James Monroe papers, Box 1, OCA; H. Griswold to James Monroe, December 19, 1859, RG 30/22, James Monroe papers, Box 1, OCA; *Liberator*, January 6, 1860; *Oberlin Evangelist*, January 4, 1860.

<sup>134</sup> Henry Wise, telegram, December 12, 1859, RG 30/22, James Monroe papers, Box 1, OCA; H.E. Blake to James Monroe, December 1, 1859, RG 30/24, FP, Box 7, Folder 12, OCA; *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 21, 1859.

<sup>135</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, January 4, 1860.

<sup>136</sup> Henry Prudden to “Dear Father,” December 21, 1859, RG 30/24, FP, Box 4, Folder 4, OCA.

<sup>137</sup> Henry Cowles to Lewis Tappan, December 12, 1859, AMA archives, Ohio, microfilm roll 9; *Oberlin Evangelist*, January 4, 1860; “A Monument, To Commemorate the Manly Virtues of Those Noble Representatives of the Colored Race of the Nineteenth Century, John Copeland, Lewis Leary, and Shields Green,” December 29, 1859, AMA archives, Ohio, microfilm roll 9; *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 1, 1860; *Liberator*, January 13, 1860; Robert S. Fletcher, “John Brown and Oberlin,” *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, Vol.XXVIII, No.5, February 1, 1932, 141. The town also raised money for an impressive monument for Leary, Copeland, and Shields Green (who was rumored to have also had Oberlin ties).

<sup>138</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 196-197; Oates, *To Purge This land with Blood*, 310-312.

*Evangelist*, “honest indefinitely before their competitors.” “We wish with all our heart,” the editor proclaimed, “the Republican party were better than it is.” They would give their support despite the party’s antislavery shortcomings, while promising “to do all we can to elevate its moral tone, and bring it more fully into sympathy with freedom and righteousness and the cause of the oppressed.”<sup>139</sup> Despite their reservations, Oberlin speakers went out in force to stump for the Republicans while others preached politics at home.<sup>140</sup> James Monroe gave over 30 speeches around Ohio in the weeks leading up to the election, and Charles Finney was overheard at family prayers beseeching God to “annihilate the Democratic Party.”<sup>141</sup>

Monroe was unable to attend the Republican National Convention in May, so Norton Townshend took his place among the Chicago delegates who nominated Abraham Lincoln for the Presidency.<sup>142</sup> When word of the nomination reached Oberlin, the community first received the news “rather coolly,” since many believed Lincoln to be too conservative on the slavery issue. “We wish with all our hearts,” the editor of the *Oberlin Evangelist* wrote, the convention “had tried their hand upon a better man.”<sup>143</sup> Nonetheless, a group of students decided to make “a big bluster,” and formed a torchlight parade that was marshaled around Tappan Square. Gradually, the community warmed to the news, and musicians came to the square, formed a band, and marched with the torch carriers around a huge bonfire that had been lit in the center of the square. Once over a thousand people had gathered, speeches were offered in support of Lincoln, who though he may not have been Oberlin’s initial

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<sup>139</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 12, 1860

<sup>140</sup> *Lorain County News*, April 4, 1860; Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 196-197.

<sup>141</sup> *Lorain County News*, n.d., in *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, November 27, 1860; *Lorain County News*, September 12, October 24, 1860; Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, 1996), 213.

<sup>142</sup> *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, May 14, 1860; See also *Oberlin Evangelist* May 23, 1860.

<sup>143</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 12, 1860.

choice, was now their “first and only choice.”<sup>144</sup> In conclusion, Oberlin’s church bells were “rung like mad.”<sup>145</sup>

The Republicans rolled to victory in Ohio. The state elections in October were a Republican blowout and proved to many that the Democrats were doomed in the next month’s national elections.<sup>146</sup> The *Ohio State Journal* declared it “the most brilliant [victory] ever achieved in the state by the Republican Party.”<sup>147</sup> In November, Lincoln racked up a majority of nearly 47,000 votes statewide as close to ninety percent of eligible voters turned out to cast ballots. The margin of victory was eighty percent in Oberlin, which, however, did not officially include several dozen Oberlin women who turned out at the polls and “offered to vote.”<sup>148</sup> As election returns came in, some in Oberlin still held back enthusiasm because slavery had not been eradicated in the election. The “tangible results from this election in the way of help to the slave,” the *Oberlin Evangelist* proclaimed, “we may expect too much.” Still, the editor rejoiced “that its boundaries are at length set.”<sup>149</sup>

Early in 1861, however, the venom spewing from the South caused many Ohioans to fear secession and war. As John Langston remembered, “All could feel...the approach of a cruel, deadly storm.”<sup>150</sup> In February, an Oberlin meeting produced an “Oberlin Manifesto” that praised the Union, while delegates offered prayers for wisdom and guidance for themselves and national leaders.<sup>151</sup> However, when shots were fired on Fort Sumter on April 12, the fears of many Oberlinites were realized. At the news, an *Oberlin Evangelist* editorial accompanied the call for a

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<sup>144</sup> Gilles Shurtleff to Ephriam [?], May 19, 1860, RG 30/32, Giles W. and Mary Burton Shurtleff papers, Box 1, OCA; See also *Lorain County News*, May 23, 1860.

<sup>145</sup> *Lorain County News*, May 23, 1860.

<sup>146</sup> Eugene H. Roseboom, *The History of the State of Ohio*, Vol.IV, (Columbus, 1944), 370.

<sup>147</sup> *Ohio State Journal*, October 11, 1860.

<sup>148</sup> *Lorain County News*, November 7, 14, 1860.

<sup>149</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, November 21, 1860; *Lorain County News*, November 21, 1860.

<sup>150</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 198.

<sup>151</sup> John Keep and Henry Cowles to Abraham Lincoln, February 14, 1861, Abraham Lincoln papers, LOC, at [www.memory.loc.gov](http://www.memory.loc.gov) (accessed March 3, 2009).

“great Union Meeting,” and asked, “Who knows but that the throes of mortal strife which began at Sumter are the signs of our country’s regeneration?”<sup>152</sup> On the 17<sup>th</sup>, over 2,000 men and women gathered in Oberlin for the assembly, and any divisions that may have existed within the town before hostilities commenced were quickly and powerfully put aside for the sake of the support of the Union. In fact, in an incredible show of unity, Lewis D. Boynton, the formerly Democratic father of Rescue villain Shakespeare and member of the 1859 federal grand jury was selected as a convention vice president alongside a handful of abolitionists and that first Oberlin pioneer, Peter Pindar Pease. Stirring speeches were given by Professors Peck and Fairchild, James Fitch, Ralph Plumb, and John Langston in support of Union and in opposition to treason.<sup>153</sup>

Two days later, the students called a meeting in the college chapel to “rally to the defense of the Union” and enroll volunteers for the army. Before the rolls were opened, the young men and other Oberlinites were addressed by Professor Monroe, who had just returned from Columbus to “stir up the students and people of Oberlin to the duty of the hour,” and also to bring official enrollment forms. When the roll was laid on the desk, a large number of students rushed to affix their names to it.<sup>154</sup> Before nightfall, a group of Oberlinites had gone into the woods and brought back the tallest tree they could find, brought it into the center of town, and ran up an American flag. That night, half of a company was enlisted and several thousand dollars were pledged to sustain the volunteers. The next day was a Sunday, and many prayerfully considered the task before them. As the Sabbath passed, those who feared the rolls might fill before Monday morning sent in their names. In two days, 131 men offered

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<sup>152</sup> Phillips, *Oberlin Colony*, 100-101.

<sup>153</sup> *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, April 19, 1861.

<sup>154</sup> Fairchild, *Oberlin: The Colony and the College, 1833-1883* (Oberlin, 1883), 159; *Lorain County News*, April 24, 1861.

their services for the 100 man company. By Tuesday morning, a second company had been filled, and both began drilling in earnest upon Tappan Square.<sup>155</sup> One resident noted with satisfaction that “Oberlin, which has been first in bringing about the state of feeling that produced this crisis now wishes to bear her share of meeting it.”<sup>156</sup>

Town business came to a halt for the next two days as Oberlin joined forces to outfit their company as quickly as possible.<sup>157</sup> Forgotten were their demonstrations against the government just two years before. In this fight, it was clear to all that, despite the explicit disclaimers of the federal government, they were on the side of freedom against slavery. That war-torn April, “Oberlin fairly blossomed out with the stars and stripes.” Fairchild remembered that “it was a great relief to know that these were the symbols of righteousness and liberty, and not of oppression.” Five hundred Oberlin women formed a “Florence Nightingale Association” to prepare socks and uniforms for the men, and many others accompanied the men to the depot, intent on joining their sons, brothers, and husbands on the battlefield as nurses. The Oberlin Brass Band tendered their services to the regiment as musicians. On April 25<sup>th</sup>, Oberlin’s “Monroe Rifles” went to war to fight “slavery first, and the devil afterwards.”<sup>158</sup>

One of the first to fall at the First Battle of Manassas was Oberlin student Albert Morgan.<sup>159</sup> He would not be the last. At Oberlin’s commencement in 1861, the program bore the names of 29 members of the senior class, nine of which were

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<sup>155</sup> See also *Daily Cleveland Herald*, April 24, 1861; *Lorain County News*, April 24, 1861; Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 159-160.

<sup>156</sup> “Brother” to Lucien C. Warner, April 20, 1861, RG 30/24, FP, Box 10, Folder 11, OCA.

<sup>157</sup> The minutes of the Young Ladies’ Literary Society for April 24, 1861 read “No meeting. The War excitement too great.” Minutes of the Young Ladies’ Literary Society, RG 30/24, FP, Box 12, Folder 3, OCA.

<sup>158</sup> Edmund R. Stiles Diary, March 24, 1861, RG 30/24, FP, Box 9, Folder 12, OCA; *Lorain County News*, April 24, May 1, July 3, 1861; *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, April 30, 1861; Ralph Plumb to James Monroe, March 12, 1861, RG 30/22, James Monroe papers, Box 1, OCA; Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 162; G. Frederick Wright, “Oberlin’s Contribution to Ethics,” *The Biblioteca Sacra*, Vol.LVII (July, 1900), 439.

<sup>159</sup> *Oberlin News*, n.d., in *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, August 8, 1861.

marked with a star denoting “in federal army.” All nine of these men were awarded their degrees with the rest, yet as the honors were being conferred, absent senior Burford Jeakins lay dying on a Virginia battlefield, and William W. Parmenter was losing his own battle against death in a New Orleans prison.<sup>160</sup> The fates of these particular men was not yet known to the audience, but midway through the graduation exercises, news of the battle at Cross Lanes and the reported deaths of several Oberlin boys reached town. “Most in the audience were in tears,” one alumnus remembered, “and Prof. Morgan could scarcely speak for sobs...With very few words, diplomas were presented to us, and in silence, we left the platform.”<sup>161</sup>

There was a sense of “goneness” around Oberlin. The Oberlin Musical Union lacked the impressive balance it had exhibited in years past, as tenors and basses were in short supply.<sup>162</sup> James Fairchild estimated that close to 850 Oberlin students enlisted in the army over the course of the war, and the enrollment dropped from 1313 in 1860 to just 862 two years later. One in ten of those men never returned home.<sup>163</sup> Yet as Oberlin boys fell, those men and women remaining at home kept up a concerted effort to force the administration towards a policy of emancipation.<sup>164</sup> At the 1862 commencement exercises, alumnus James Thome, then a minister in Cleveland, declared that “the necessities of the country, the rights of the enslaved, and the honor of God demand that President Lincoln exercise without delay, the authority which the war power gives him...to abolish slavery throughout the ‘Confederate States.’” The Oberlin meeting requested that he forward his comments directly to

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<sup>160</sup> *Oberlin Evangelist*, September 11, 1861; *Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Oberlin College for the College Year 1861-2* (Oberlin, 1861), 7-12; Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 166-167.

<sup>161</sup> L.H. Plumb to P.D. Sherman, March 1, 1918, RG 14, College General, Series 15, Box 1, OCA; See also Henry Cowles to George Whipple, November 16, 1861, AMA archives, Ohio, microfilm roll 11.

<sup>162</sup> *Lorain County News*, May 18, 1864.

<sup>163</sup> C.J. Fenn to Lewis Tappan, June 6, 1861, AMA archives, Ohio, microfilm roll 10.

<sup>164</sup> See J.P. Bardwell to George Whipple, September 8, 1862, AMA archives, Ohio, microfilm roll 11.

Abraham Lincoln, and Thome complied.<sup>165</sup> Finney used his pulpit to urge his parishioners to be discriminating and “more thoroughly consider that this war ‘for the union,’ is not morally to abolish oppression.”<sup>166</sup> In private letters, he lamented the fact that Southern fields, that had “hitherto been moistened by the blood & sweat of the poor slave” were now red with the blood of Union soldiers. However, he admitted that “for humanity’s sake we cheerfully though tearfully make the sacrifice. In this collision the cause of the slave is that of humanity, of liberty, of civilization, of Christianity.”<sup>167</sup>

### ***“WHEN YOU NEED US, SEND FOR US”***

Not to be outdone by their white brethren, Oberlin African Americans attempted to enlist in the Union Army as soon as Lincoln declared a state of insurrection. However, these men were not allowed to enlist initially because African Americans were refused service in the Union army.<sup>168</sup> Nonetheless, in September of 1861, Oberlin resident and former slave James Stone had successfully enlisted in the First Ohio Light Artillery, and became perhaps the first African American to serve in the military during the Civil War. His light complexion had allowed him to “pass” for white in many instances, and he faithfully served for thirteen months before he died in October of 1862. The *Lorain County News* reported his passing by noting that “One

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<sup>165</sup> *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, September 4, 1862.

<sup>166</sup> James David Essig, “The Lord’s Free Man: Charles G. Finney and his Abolitionism,” *Civil War History*, 24 (1978), 44. In 1864, Finney would express his hope to Gerrit Smith that radicals would “put in nomination for Pres. a less conservative man than Mr. Lincoln.” The northern people, Finney said, “are prepared to elect the most radical abolitionist there is if he can get the nomination...can we not at least impress him with the conviction that he can not be reelected unless he goes in for the immediate & total destruction of slavery? Let us try.” Charles Grandison Finney to Gerrit Smith, RG 30/24, FP, Box 6, Folder 7, OCA.

<sup>167</sup> Charles Grandison Finney to [?] Barlow, February 13, 1863, RG 30/24, FP, Box 6, Folder 1, OCA.

<sup>168</sup> See Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 199; See also Henry Lee alumni record file, OCA.

soldier, at least, has been given by the despised, chattel race, to the cause of the Union.”<sup>169</sup>

As Oberlin African Americans as well as those across the North loudly proclaimed their patriotism and decried the refusal of their services, leaders like John Langston advised them to prepare themselves, but wait patiently until whites realized just how much the country needed their help.<sup>170</sup> In July of 1862, Langston spoke at an Oberlin war meeting and urged the formation of a Black military company.<sup>171</sup> Also that month, another Oberlin meeting stingingly criticized Lincoln’s refusal to endorse emancipation as a war aim or to allow African Americans to bear arms for the Union.<sup>172</sup>

In August, Langston approached Ohio Governor David Todd about the possibility of him being allowed to raise a company of African American troops, to which Todd told him, “When we want colored men we will notify you.” Langston humbly left the governor with his own request: “when you need us, send for us.”<sup>173</sup> Oberlin leaders continued to agitate for the rights of their African American neighbors and classmates to fight for their own rights. By September, the town had established an integrated drill company to prepare for war.<sup>174</sup>

News of Lincoln’s Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation that month was a sweet sound in Oberlinites’ ears.<sup>175</sup> In it, Lincoln declared freedom to all slaves in Confederate states that did not return to Union control by January 1, 1863, and allowed for the enrollment of African Americans in the Union army. Even before official word came down, William Howard Day wrote from England to Treasury

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<sup>169</sup> *Lorain County News*, November 19, 1862.

<sup>170</sup> Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 385.

<sup>171</sup> *Lorain County News*, July 9, 23, August 6, 1862; *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 16, 1862.

<sup>172</sup> *Lorain County News*, August 6, 1862.

<sup>173</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 205-206; *Lorain County News*, August 6, 1862.

<sup>174</sup> *Lorain County News*, September 10, 17, 24, 1862.

<sup>175</sup> See *Lorain County News*, September 24, October 1, 15, 22, November 12, 1862.



Secretary Chase to express his hearty approval of the proposed “Act of State decreeing Emancipation.” Despite the limited nature of the proclamation (it actually did not free any slaves, and did not apply to slaves in territories under Union control), Day regarded it as “a triumph of our principles,” and as “a beginning to an end.” He would not dare “question the terms, but would rejoice that in it all I see Liberty.”<sup>176</sup>

The official Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 was a jubilee day in Oberlin’s history.<sup>177</sup> One Lorain County editor doubted if the Oberlin community had ever felt more genuinely happy than upon the reception of the Proclamation. When the expected papers reached town, John Langston grasped the newsprint and read the Emancipation Proclamation aloud from the front steps of the chapel. As his ecstatic audience shouted in celebration, Langston followed the outpouring of enthusiasm and read it a second time. Professor Henry Cowles, “his voice trembling with emotion,” followed the reading with words of thanksgiving and prayer. Rockets and bonfires lit the Oberlin sky that night, and a procession of African Americans marched proudly across town in their own celebratory parade.<sup>178</sup>

Just days later, Massachusetts Governor John Andrew finally received official authorization from the federal government to raise the nation’s first African American volunteer regiment. George Stearns, one of John Brown’s strongest supporters in the lead-up to Harper’s Ferry, was placed in charge of the recruitment effort, in no small part because of his intimate friendships with prominent African Americans. He, in

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<sup>176</sup> William Howard Day to Salmon P. Chase, March 31, 1862, in *BAP*, vol.VI, 524-526. See also J.M. Fitch to George Whipple, September 27, 1862, AMA archives, Ohio, roll 11. Less solemn was one Oberlin businessman whose advertisement in the *Lorain County News* read “Abraham Lincoln has liberated 3,000,000 slaves and R.H. Birge has just received a splendid stock of fresh groceries.” Phillips, *Oberlin Colony*, 105.

<sup>177</sup> *Lorain County News*, December 21, 1862, January 7, 1863.

<sup>178</sup> *Lorain County News*, January 7, 1863.

turn, selected some of America's most influential Black men as recruiters, including John Mercer Langston, who was named chief agent for the West.<sup>179</sup>

Langston's most important mission in the Spring of 1863 was recruitment on behalf of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Regiment. He was joined in his efforts by his brother Charles, who had already been working among contrabands in Kansas, and his brother-in-law O.S.B. Wall, both Rescuers and both committed to the Black freedom struggle.<sup>180</sup> Concentrating mainly in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, they recruited more than 3,000 eager Black soldiers that were duly sent on to the East.<sup>181</sup> This first regiment was quickly filled, and it included a large cadre of Oberlin men, some who left for war as non-commissioned officers.<sup>182</sup> Among this number were at least six former slaves and three self-emancipated bondsmen.<sup>183</sup> In addition, 16 African Americans hailing from Oberlin were enrolled in the "Fred Douglass Regiment" of the 54<sup>th</sup>, recruited in New York state by Langston's friend and mentor Frederick Douglass.<sup>184</sup>

With the 54<sup>th</sup> filled, Langston opened the rolls for the 55<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts. His wife Carrie Wall Langston and Oberlin alumna Fanny Jackson led the fund raising campaign for a stand of colors for the regiment.<sup>185</sup> These flags were carried all through the war until they were eventually "returned at last," Langston reported, "bearing all the marks of patriotic, brave service, to the capitol of the Commonwealth

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<sup>179</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 201; David Dirck Van Tassel and John Vacha, *"Behind Bayonets": The Civil War in Northern Ohio* (Kent, 2006), 62-3; Versalle F. Washington, *Eagles on Their Buttons: A Black Infantry Regiment in the Civil War* (Columbia, MO, 1999), 9.

<sup>180</sup> Sattira Douglas to Robert Hamilton, June 9, 1863, in *BAP* vol.V, 212-215; *Liberator*, May 15, 1863; *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, June 19, 1863; George Washington Williams, *A History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-65* (New York, 1888), 133-134, 142-143. Wall later became a captain in the 104<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Troops, the first commissioned African American captain of the U.S. Army. See also *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, March 23, 1865.

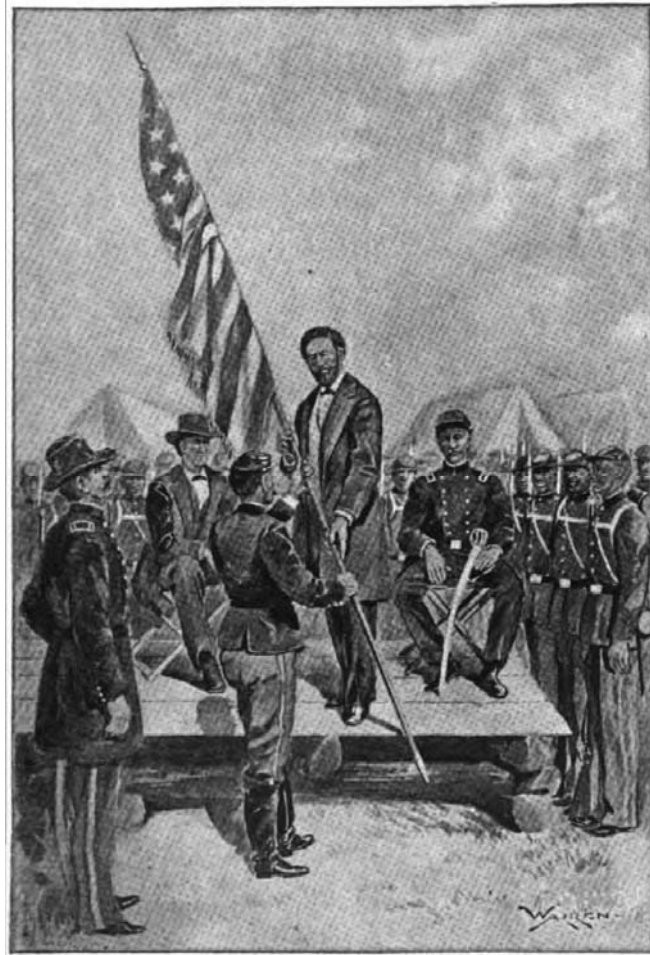
<sup>181</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 202.

<sup>182</sup> *Lorain County News*, February 18, 1863.

<sup>183</sup> *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, April 18, 1863.

<sup>184</sup> *Newark Ohio Advocate*, May 8, 1863; See also *Lowell Daily Citizen and News*, March 18, 1863.

<sup>185</sup> *Lorain County News*, June 10, 1863.



**Illustration 10.7: John Mercer Langston presenting the colors to the 5<sup>th</sup> U.S.C.T.  
(from Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation* (1894))**

of Massachusetts.”<sup>186</sup> In all, at least seventy African American men with Oberlin connections served in the Union army. Langston was also largely responsible for raising Ohio’s first African American regiment, the Fifth United States Colored Regiment, and in addition to those Ohioans, nearly 500 of the members of the 54<sup>th</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts were recruits of the Oberlin men.<sup>187</sup> In presenting the colors to the 5<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Troops from Ohio, Langston told them, “My boys, sons of the State, go forth now as you are called to fight for your country and its

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<sup>186</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 204-205; See also *Liberator*, June 12, 1863 for description of banners.

<sup>187</sup> Cheek and Cheek, *John Mercer Langston*, 395.

government!”<sup>188</sup> “No regiment,” he remembered, “ever left its camp followed by more hearty anxieties and earnest prayers for its welfare than this one.”<sup>189</sup>

### **“FORWARD!”**

Colonel Robert Shaw nervously smoked a cigar as he and the rest of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment gazed at the imposing walls of Charleston’s Fort Wagner in the distance on July 18, 1863. The Confederate batteries were incessantly firing shells at the huge mass of African American troops, but at such a distance, the rounds would invariably land hundreds of yards in front of them. If they by chance rolled to where the 54th stood at the ready, the soldiers would simply move aside and let the shot continue on its way.<sup>190</sup>

Finally, after what seemed like an interminable wait, General George C. Strong rode into their midst and steeled the 54<sup>th</sup> for battle with a fiery pep talk. He charged each and every man with upholding the honor of the great Commonwealth of Massachusetts, then boldly asked if there was a man among them who thought that he would not be able to sleep that night in the captured fort. A deafening chorus of “No!” filled the salty air. Finally, the general called the regimental color bearer forward, and Sergeant John Wall, a twenty year old Oberlin student, stepped forward with the Stars and Bars. Henry J. Peal, who had emancipated himself earlier in the war and was attending school at Oberlin before he enlisted, stood by him with the colors of Massachusetts firmly gripped in his hands.<sup>191</sup> Peale had told a friend earlier that “It

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<sup>188</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 209-210.

<sup>189</sup> *ibid.*, 204.

<sup>190</sup> *Harper's Weekly*, August 8, 1863; Stephen R. Wise, *Gate of Hell: Campaign for Charleston Harbor, 1863* (Columbia, 1994), 102.

<sup>191</sup> Wise, *Gates of Hell*, 102; See also *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, June 25, 1863.

makes me proud that two of the Oberlin boys carry the first flags that ever the Colored man could call his country's flag.”<sup>192</sup>

At 7:45 P.M., Shaw told his troops “Now I want you to prove yourselves men.” From the front, he shouted their orders: “Move in quick time until within a hundred yards of the fort; then double quick and charge.” After a short pause, he gave the order, “Forward!”<sup>193</sup> The 54<sup>th</sup> advanced in the dark under heavy Confederate fire until they began the final charge towards Fort Wagner. As they neared the moat of the fort, Rebel fire from Ft. Wagner as well as Ft. Sumter, so heavy that one officer believed that a lightening storm had swept down onto the battlefield, tore through the Union forces with devastating effect.<sup>194</sup>

Still, though the Confederate fire had stalled much of the 54<sup>th</sup>, John Wall continued his valiant advance at the head of the regiment. Suddenly, a Confederate round ripped into the body of the color sergeant, and he fell helplessly into a shell crater. Unable to go on, Wall called out for a comrade to take up the national colors for him. From behind, sergeant William C. Carney answered the call, and Wall handed off the colors. Re-energized, Shaw and the African American troops followed Carney towards the center of the battery. The colonel was one of the first to reach the parapet, but as he stood atop it shouting his men on, he was riddled with bullets, and fell to the ground dead. Despite the loss of their commander, the African American troops of the 54<sup>th</sup> continued the fight.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, June 25, 1863.

<sup>193</sup> Wise, *Gates of Hell*, 102; Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (New York, 1989), 3-4, 13-16.

<sup>194</sup> *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, vol. 14 (Washington, 1902), 366; *Harper's Weekly*, August 8, 1863.

<sup>195</sup> *The Rebellion Record: A Diary of American Events, with Documents, Narratives Illustrative Incidents, Poetry, Etc.*, Vol. VII (Putnam, 1864), 63; “Report of Col. Edward N. Hallowell, Fifty-fourth Massachusetts (Colored) Infantry,” November 7, 1863, in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Vol. XXVIII, ed. Robert N. Scott (Washington, 1890), 362; *Harper's Weekly*, August 8, 1863.

William Carney never let the flag touch the ground, even when he was shot through the leg. After two more severe wounds, Carney was still able to reach the Confederate battery, and with all his might, he planted his flag firmly upon the ramparts of rebel ground. As the Stars and Bars waved above the fray, Henry Peal, the former slave who had finally found peace and freedom in Oberlin, defiantly waved the flag of Massachusetts back and forth over the Confederate walls.<sup>196</sup>

William Carney and Henry J. Peal were among four African American men to be awarded the Gilmore medal of honor for bravery in the siege of Fort Wagner. Peal continued to carry the colors of Massachusetts through the rebellious states that continued to consider him a “fugitive slave”—the property of another man. This “chattel” proudly and defiantly waved his colors at the front of Union lines and in the faces of his lifelong tormenters until the Battle of Olustee, in Florida, where he was mortally wounded. Though he never saw Oberlin again, he died a free man, “with the Gilmore medal on his breast.”<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> George E. Stephens and Donald Yakovone, *A Voice of Thunder: A Black Soldier's Civil War* (Urbana, 1998), 284.

<sup>197</sup> “Report of Col. Edward N. Hallowell, Fifty-fourth Massachusetts (Colored) Infantry,” 362; Luis F. Emilio, *The Assault on Fort Wagner, July 18, 1863: The Memorable Charge of the Fifty Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers* (Boston, 1887), 13.

## CONCLUSION

### *“Be not conformed to this world”*

On November 8, 1864, Oberlinites gathered at the polls to re-elect Republican Abraham Lincoln to the presidency. Though the balloting was technically secret, the votes of most Oberlin men were already well known. Giles Shurtleff, an 1859 Oberlin College graduate, had arrived in town that afternoon with several other members of the 5<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Regiment, of which he was commander. Limping from unhealed wounds, Shurtleff “tendered his vote for Lincoln and the Union.” The cheer that greeted his cast ballot “was such as to melt to tears a man who never had the weakness to quail before an enemy.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet it was the vote of community patriarch John Keep that best captured the spirit of the day and provided one set of bookends for the story of the Oberlin community in the antislavery movement. Keep had been one of the first colonists on the ground in Oberlin, and it was he who had cast the deciding vote in favor of admitting African American students in 1834. Keep had been a tireless worker in the Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society in the late 1830s and 1840s, represented Oberlin and American abolitionism in England in 1839-1840, and was an indefatigable campaigner for the Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the 1840s. On that day in 1864, Keep was in the midst of serving his 40<sup>th</sup> consecutive year as a trustee of Oberlin College (a post he would continue to hold, never missing a meeting, until his death six years later.)<sup>2</sup>

Keep’s advanced age caused his limbs to tremble, and only with the help of a friend could he walk to the polling place and offer his ballot to the election officer. To the “throng” that had surrounded him, Keep declared that this would probably be the

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<sup>1</sup> *Lorain County News*, November 9, 1864.

<sup>2</sup> James Harris Fairchild, *Oberlin: The Colony and the College, 1833-1883* (Oberlin, 1883), 292.

last vote for president he would ever have the “privilege” to cast. With his ballot, he attached a prepared statement that was read aloud to the crowd. “Palsied be the *tongue* which now wags for treason,” he wrote, “and the *hand* which would cut the jugular vein of our Christian Commonwealth.” He signed the statement “John Keep, age 83. Oberlin, Nov. 1864,” and the official endorsed it “A Freeman’s Vote, 1864, for Abraham Lincoln.”

Keep was present at Oberlin’s creation, and he fought with his fellow Oberlinites at the front lines of the battle against slavery until it was won. In the early years of the twentieth century, Rev. Theodore T. Munger remembered him as a man who had favored action over stubborn adherence to dogma and who had an extraordinary ability “to measure the questions” before the antislavery movement. It was Keep’s “clear insight into their meaning and their drift” that made him so important among Oberlin’s abolitionist leadership, and it was “his courage and wisdom in maintaining them alone and under an opposition which led to ostracism” that ultimately made the crusade a success.<sup>3</sup>

Oberlinites, for their part, reverently called John Keep “Father Keep,” yet in his own humble way, he would only claim the honor of being a small part of something much greater.<sup>4</sup> The entire Oberlin community—students, faculty, alumni, and townspeople—had been the ones who in the antislavery movement consistently put their “hand to the plow and never turned back, who saw the thing that most needed to be done and at once set about doing it.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Wisner Bacon, *Theodore Thorton Munger: New England Minister* (New Haven, 1913), 17-18.

<sup>4</sup> See Cecilia Lucy Brightwell, *Memorials of the Life of Amelia Opie, Selected and Arranged from her Letters, Diaries, and Other Manuscripts* (Norwich, 1854), 343; *The Congregational Quarterly*, Vol.XIII, No.2 (April, 1871), 219-224.

<sup>5</sup> “‘Father’ Keep,” *The Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, Vol.III, No.3 (December, 1906), 121-122.



Oberlin Colony and its Collegiate Institute were founded by visionaries who were little different than the host of other missionaries bent on saving the “Godless West” in the early years of the nineteenth century. John J. Shipherd, Philo P. Stewart, John Keep, Peter Pindar Pease, and the handful of families who settled in Oberlin in 1833 and 1834 were probably the only ones who envisioned their colony and college as being potentially world-changing. However, even those early faithful Oberlinites who sought utopia in the Ohio wilderness would not have imagined that the greatest contribution of their college and community toward the millennium, in the eyes of many contemporaries, would be its role in the fight to end slavery in the United States.

The community and entire student body in 1833 were white. Though some of the founders joined “Father” Shipherd when he attended meetings of the Western Reserve Anti-Slavery Society, many others leaned toward colonization or kept their distance from the controversial antislavery movement altogether. All struggled with varying degrees of racism or racialist thinking. Moreover, in Oberlin’s earliest months, no issue seemed more pressing than simple survival. Although they had already developed a strict religious covenant that would guide their personal and missionary lives for the next decades, they could not deal with their trespasses or those of others without first procuring their daily bread.

Yet it was a curious collision of Oberlin’s near bankruptcy with the moral bankruptcy of powerful anti-abolitionists in the West that changed the trajectories of the community, the town, and the entire antislavery movement. When the Lane Seminary Rebels took their dismissal from the Cincinnati school rather than dissolve their antislavery society and recant their egalitarian abolitionist declarations, John J. Shipherd, who had gone out as Oberlin’s financial agent in a last ditch effort to save his venture, arranged for them to continue their theological studies at his Oberlin Institute. In the process, the school gained the substantial financial backing of

powerful Eastern philanthropists, a faculty of committed abolitionists, the services of the nation's most famous revivalist (Charles Grandison Finney) as professor of theology, and an enlarged student body, a significant number of whom were determined to become abolitionist missionaries.

However, the condition demanded by all the parties now concerned with the Oberlin venture was that students be admitted to the college "irrespective of color." After a season of pained deliberation and Shipherd's repeated pleas to his community to be true to the utopian ideals of love and brotherhood to which they had all covenanted, Oberlin Collegiate Institute became the first institution of higher learning in America to admit men and women of all races. As a small handful of African American students began to enroll, other progressive students came to Oberlin in droves, the institute having earned the reputation as the only college in America that welcomed true freedom of discussion, especially with regards to antislavery topics. Those trustees and community members who had opposed color-blind admissions or the school and community's commitment to abolitionism soon left Oberlin, and the school that had only recently faced financial ruin now basked in the hearty support of the abolitionist movement and its most generous donors.

Student abolitionists from Oberlin went out in 1835 as the largest contingent of abolitionist lecturers for the American Anti-Slavery Society, and they were instrumental in spurring the movement to its greatest period of growth ever. In a region steeped in racism and with little exposure to abolitionism besides the most shocking passages local conservative papers could excerpt from William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*, lecturers from Oberlin became a human face for the abolitionist movement in the West. They operated amongst the region's population in a familiar revival atmosphere, and blunted the sharp and often negative picture most Americans had of the abolitionist movement from limited exposure to its most inflammatory

opinions and exaggerations of the conservative press. Others gave substance to their abolitionist professions by teaching at African American schools throughout the Northern United States and Canada or by preaching immediate abolition from church pulpits across the free states. In its earliest years, the Oberlin Institute sent out hundreds of student abolitionist-missionaries in addition to the antislavery activities of its faculty members and other community leaders independently and through the Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society and American Anti-Slavery Society. The community was becoming a bastion of abolitionism, and was quickly developing into the most influential antislavery stronghold west of the Alleghenies.

As a diverse student body and faculty assembled in the remote Ohio town, they developed an abolitionist ideology and egalitarian way of life that accommodated the entire diversity of American antislavery thought. Children of Quakers, former slaveholders, former slaves, daughters of politicians, and sons of nonresistants joined together and hammered out a collective plan to bring slavery to an end. Their isolation and the community and college's commitment to free inquiry and discussion allowed Oberlinites the freedom to openly and freely develop complicated and controversial ideas, a liberty that could hardly be found anywhere else in America, even in its most liberal locales.

Their appeal was initially to be primarily a moral one, yet early on Oberlinites realized the value of direct political action. They continued to seek the conversion of the North to abolition while simultaneously sending missionaries into the South and assisting escaping slaves on the Underground Railroad to freedom. They recognized a kernel of truth in the arguments of the come-outers while they also attempted to make organized religion an antislavery society in itself. They balanced pacifism with the use of force, and would not label themselves Tappanites or Garrisonians for the sake

of conformity. Largely free of dogma, Oberlin antislavery sought a single end, the abolition of slavery; the means used were less important.

Yet as the national movement in the East struggled with internal divisions over “appropriate” means, in Ohio and the West, abolitionists continued to offer a more united front against slavery. The personal feuds that divided Eastern abolitionist leaders and that gave the impression of a clear and deep split in the national movement were not nearly as extreme in Ohio and the West. There, abolitionists better resembled the Oberlin example of practical, independent abolitionism. Oberlinites led the push to avoid division in the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society, and only after Easterners came to Ohio and encouraged a split along the same lines as the national society did Ohio’s antislavery unity crack.

Still, the division was initially nominal. There continued to be a significant overlap in the membership rolls of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society and the new Garrisonian organization. Men like Oberlin’s John Keep persisted in urging within both organizations for abolitionists to consider all tactics and to push their brand of antislavery towards the points that offered the most hope of success. That their efforts were largely successful is attested to by the fact that the new Garrisonian organization regularly elected prominent Liberty Party men to positions of leadership in their society.

This cooperation across ideological lines was so alien to Garrison and his Eastern followers that they charged Oberlin College and the community with contaminating the western region with ideological inconsistency, using the rhetoric and divisive logic that had become a common part of the Eastern split. However, the targets of this criticism in the West seldom argued the point; it simply was not an important issue with them. Most Oberlinites agreed that an antislavery strategy limited by strict ideological conformity risked being an ineffectual one. Theirs was a

dynamic composite of various schools of antislavery thought that appealed to a wide range of antislavery advocates in the West. While Easterners feuded, Oberlin became one of the most ideologically influential and tactically successful groups of abolitionists within the antislavery vanguard.

With success, of course, came even more resistance, and as Oberlin College and the community became one of the most powerful symbols of abolitionism in Ohio and all of the United States, the conservative backlash grew in proportion. The Oberlin community, in many critics' opinions, stood for all that was wrong with the abolitionist movement: the promotion of racial equality, encouragement of women to act out of their "spheres," disregard for laws that supported slavery, and the blatant disregard for the "property" rights of slaveholders. Books with titles like *Oberlin Unmasked* and *Abolitionism Unveiled* attempted to ruin the reputations of the college and community. In the late 1830s and early 1840s, there were several attempts in the Ohio legislature to limit the growth and expansion of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute. Though several of these were successful, the Oberlin community's rising star in the abolitionist movement was the root of another constant movement in the legislature to completely revoke the Institute's charter. Much of the evidence cited in these hearings was exaggerated rumor. Other accusations, such as Oberlin's active role in the Underground Railroad, was proudly affirmed by Oberlinites who simply saw themselves as obeying a higher law than that of man.

To be sure, Oberlin's abolitionist reputation had begun to be forged when it admitted African American students in 1834. From that time, Black students and community residents were a vital and integrated part of the town's antislavery crusade. As their percentage of the Oberlin population grew significantly in the mid 1840s, African Americans became important leaders of Oberlin's abolitionists. Their agitation against Ohio's Black Laws, in favor of African American suffrage, and

prominent positions in the Ohio and national Black convention movements gave the Oberlin community and the larger abolitionist movement continuous injections of radicalism. As their Black neighbors and classmates established themselves as the conscience of the abolitionist movement, the rest of the Oberlin community followed their lead.

In the 1850s, Oberlin African Americans were instrumental in shaping the college and town's responses to the aggressions of the Slave Power. Though they still comprised a relatively small portion of the community, and though Oberlin's symbolic importance was well beyond what the town and school's numbers would suggest, it seemed as if Oberlinites, especially African American students, alumni, and residents, were everywhere in the free states urging resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the *Dred Scott* decision. However, as most of the white North reacted to these events for what they implied for the rights of free white men, the Oberlin community continued to stress the negative effects the laws had on African Americans and the slaves of the South. They were instrumental in the founding of the Republican Party, yet tirelessly attempted to radicalize it from within by stressing the necessity of emancipation and an expansion of Republicans' antislavery platform. In Kansas, Oberlinites sought not only the establishment of a free state, but a free state that was committed to the rights of African Americans. From inside Congress and the Ohio legislature and from without, abolitionists from Oberlin challenged the nation to see that the rights of all Americans, African Americans especially, were worthy of equal protection.

The Oberlin community was well aware that the election of Lincoln and the beginning of the Civil War did not represent a Northern commitment to emancipation or African American rights. In fact, the president's own assurances to the nation were to the contrary. Still, Oberlinites were enthusiastic supporters of the President and the

war effort because that course represented the best hope for an end to slavery in America. As soon as Lincoln declared a state of insurrection, Oberlin men filled two volunteer companies, and enlistments continued in town throughout the war. Oberlin African American alumni were some of the earliest advocates of allowing Black men to fight as well. After the Emancipation Proclamation officially authorized the raising of African American troops, Black Oberlinites were some of the busiest recruiters as well as most enthusiastic and decorated volunteers for service. The front line of the antislavery crusade had at last moved to the battlefield, and the fight for emancipation finally seemed to have come. Though brickbats and rotten eggs had given way to bullets and bayonettes, the advance guard from Oberlin stood ready to meet them for freedom's sake.

### ***“THE LANGUAGE OF TRUTH”***

When African American troops took up arms for their country, the institution of slavery gasped out its final breath. They were a crucial part of the victorious Union war effort in 1863-1865, and as they fought for their rights and the freedom of four million of their brethren, African American soldiers gained the grudging respect of white men. As one soldier noted in March of 1863, “Put a United States uniform on his back, and the *chattel* is a *man*.” “Between the toiling slave and the soldier is a gulf that nothing but a god could lift him over,” he wrote, and the man further observed that “He feels it, his looks show it...He seems to say ‘I am guarding my freedom and my manhood.’” It was clear to this soldier that “this war means *Negro Equality*.”<sup>6</sup>

The struggle to define that term “negro equality” would confound the next

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<sup>6</sup> Henry T. Johns to “Dear L,” March 2, 1863, in Henry T. Johns, *Life with the Forty-Ninth Massachusetts Volunteers* (Pittsfield, 1864), 151-152.

several generations of reformers. Still, even as the Civil War raged, Oberlinites tackled the problem. Oberlin alumni, students, and community members had made up as much as ninety percent of the workers employed by the American Missionary Association through the Civil War, and a similarly large corps of them went to the South as A.M.A. sponsored teachers for the education of the freedmen.<sup>7</sup> Several men with Oberlin connections served in leadership roles in the Freedman's Bureau, and others served as representatives in the Reconstruction Congresses that sought to consolidate the gains made in the war.<sup>8</sup> One thing was certain—slavery had finally been crushed, and men and women from Oberlin had played some of the most important parts in the decades-long struggle.

By January of 1864, the Civil War was in its final stages. Hundreds of soldiers from Oberlin were spread across the country. Some were fighting in scattered engagements with straggling Confederate forces, yet most had settled into garrison duty in Southern states that had been brought back under Union control. Oberlinites had continued to recruit white and African American soldiers even through the close of the war, yet John Mercer Langston took a break from his otherwise ceaseless efforts during the first days of 1865 to make a trip into the South.<sup>9</sup> He was scheduled to be a speaker at a celebration commemorating the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation in Nashville, Tennessee. Despite continuing guerilla attacks in the area

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<sup>7</sup> M.E. Strieby, *Oberlin and the American Missionary Association* (Oberlin, 1891), 5-6; *Oberlin Evangelist*, December 3, 1862; *Twenty Second Annual Report of the Society for the Promotion of Collegiate and Theological Education at the West* (New York, 1865), 59-60; See also Augustus Field Beard, *A Crusade of Brotherhood: A History of the American Missionary Association* (Boston, 1909), 120-141; Martha S. Jones, *All Bound up Together: The Woman Question in African American Popular Culture, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill, 2007), 139-140.

<sup>8</sup> See Fairchild, *Oberlin*, 68; John Mercer Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the Nation's Capital, or, The First and Only Negro Representative in Congress from the Old Dominion* (Hartford, 1894), 218-248.

<sup>9</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 217.



and warnings that the passage would not be a safe one, Langston was determined to attend.<sup>10</sup>

An African American soldiers' aid society, the Colored Sons of Relief, had arranged with Vice President-elect and Tennessee wartime governor Andrew Johnson to hold the celebration in the chamber of the state House of Representatives the night of January 2. As Langston took his place before a huge mixed crowd of 3,500 (including Johnson), he was offered a seat of honor—the very chair in which had sat the Speaker of the Tennessee House when secession was declared on May 6, 1861. Langston's speech that night, entitled "The War, Our National Emancipator," stressed that the Civil War had been the culmination of his and countless other antislavery agitators' life's work. Moreover, it had freed the whites of America as well as the Blacks, and ushered in the inauguration of true democracy in America.<sup>11</sup>

Andrew Johnson was so moved by Langston's oration that he invited him to speak to the African American troops camped nearby. They had until just recently been the last line of protection between Nashville and Confederate forces under General John Hood. Johnson wanted Langston to address the survivors and "in the name of the government and the country," to thank them "for their matchless services."<sup>12</sup> "Tell them for me," Johnson asked him, "that I think them the bravest men under the sun."<sup>13</sup>

Though Langston never mentioned it, he would have remembered another brave man that evening as he stood on the steps of the capital building in Nashville.

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, 224, 232-233.

<sup>11</sup> *Nashville Times*, January 4, 1865; Bobby L. Lovett, *The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930: Elites and Dilemmas* (Little Rock, 1999), 67-68; James Walter Fertig, *The Secession and Reconstruction of Tennessee* (Chicago, 1898), 25-26.

<sup>12</sup> Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 227.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Lovett, *African American History of Nashville*, 68; See also Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation*, 225.

Thirty years earlier, Amos Dresser, a new Oberlin Institute student and former Lane Rebel, had been publicly whipped with a heavy cowhide in that very street below for possessing antislavery literature and for his public avowal of abolitionist sentiments. “What sort of an institution,” the editors of *The Anti-Slavery Record* had asked in reaction, “is that which cannot bear to be spoken of in the language of truth?”<sup>14</sup> Oberlinites in 1835 agreed that slavery was that most unspeakable practice, and they went about the next three decades rebuking it in the most powerful language, through their most determined actions, and in the most practical and viable ways that they could ascertain.

Their antislavery “truth” was seldom popular, but founder John J. Shipherd had predicted as much early on. Less than a month before his death in 1844, he restated for the last time the meaning of “Oberlin” as he understood it. “The greatness of Oberlin,” he wrote, “is doubtless attributable under God to her adherence to the noble principle, that *public Institutions no less than private Christians must do right however contrary to popular sentiment.*” “That the managers of Oberlin Institute may never swerve from this grand principle,” he implored, “is one of the strongest desires of my soul. To each I would say with emphasis ‘Be not conformed to this world.’”<sup>15</sup>

The world that John Mercer Langston surveyed that January night in 1865 conformed to nothing he could recall in his thirty five years. However, conformity had never much interested Oberlinites. In the light of Amos Dresser’s humiliation thirty years before, Langston, a Black abolitionist, educated at the Oberlin Collegiate Institute and still resident in that “hot-bed of abolitionism,” pausing unmolested

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<sup>14</sup> *The Anti-Slavery Record* (New York), September 2, 1835, excerpted in Ann Hagedorn, *Beyond the River: The Untold Story of the Heroes of the Underground Railroad* (New York, 2002), 98.

<sup>15</sup> John J. Shipherd to Hamilton Hill, August 17, 1844, Letters Received by Oberlin College, Microfilm Roll 9, Oberlin College Archives.

outside the Tennessee State House after having delivered the keynote address in celebration of the anniversary of emancipation seemed truly implausible. Yet Langston's act of standing at the spot of Dresser's assault conveyed the language of truth denied his precursor, though silently. Between the memory of a cowhide whip and the satisfaction felt by the Black son of a slaveholder was the history of Oberlin in the antislavery struggle.

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